

# Botanical Speculations



# Botanical Speculations:

## *Plants in Contemporary Art*

Edited by

Giovanni Aloï

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Botanical Speculations: Plants in Contemporary Art

Edited by Giovanni Aloï

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# OPENING REMARKS

## TIFFANY HOLMES AND GIOVANNI ALOI

**Tiffany Holmes:** My name is Tiffany Holmes. I'm the Dean of Undergraduate Studies here at SAIC and it's my great pleasure to welcome you here today to our symposium called *Botanical Speculations*. This event is co-hosted by 'Conversations on Art and Science' and The Art History, Theory and Criticism Department.

Under the leadership of SAIC, now chancellor, Walter Massey, the Conversations on Art and Science Event Series was launched in 2011 as a forum for exploring interdisciplinary and critical perspectives on Art Science design and technology.

Lectures or panel discussions hosted every fall and spring terms bring noted artists, designers, and scholars to the SAIC campus to discuss their work. These dialogues provide a time and a place for considering myriad perspectives on art science design, nature, and technology. They also sustain the diverse conversations that are ongoing in the work of faculty and students here at SAIC.

I would like, especially at this moment, to deliver a special thanks to Giovanni Aloï, the conceptual mastermind behind today's event, Andy Yang, our Art and Science Faculty Coordinator and Elizabeth Anderson, our Program Coordinator for the *Visiting Artist Program*.

Welcome to all of our plant-loving audience members, thank you for supporting *Conversations on Art and Science*. Next, I'm going to hand over things and also introduce my wonderful colleague, Giovanni Aloï. He is a faculty member in the Art History, Theory and Criticism department who studied History of Art and Art Practice in Milan and moved to London in 1997 to research at Goldsmiths University, where he obtained a Postgraduate Diploma in Art History, a Master in Visual Cultures, and a Ph.D. on the subject of natural history in contemporary art.

He has curated art projects involving photography and the moving image and is a BBC radio contributor as well as the co-editor of the University of Minnesota Press new series *Art after Nature*. Giovanni's first book, titled *Art & Animals* was published in 2011, and since 2006 he

has been the editor in chief of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature and Visual Culture*.

So, with that, I'm going to hand things over to Giovanni, but please join me again in thanking him for putting this two-day event together.

**Giovanni Aloï:** I would like to thank Tiffany Holmes for supporting this event. SAIC is a fantastic institution in which innovative research and multidisciplinary creativity can thrive. Where else would have we been able to host an event on plants in contemporary art on this scale? I am particularly grateful to all my colleagues and students who will contribute to the program today and whose interest in plants is a constant source of inspiration for my own work.

# BOTANICAL SPECULATIONS

*Botanical Speculations* explores how contemporary art and science help one another reconsider the world of plants. In this book, researchers, artists, art historians, and activists collaboratively map the uncharted territories of new forms of botanical knowledge.





# PAINTING PLANTS: OBJECTIFICATION AND SYMBOLISM

GIOVANNI ALOI

On the day preceding *Botanical Speculations*, Giovanni Aloï led a tour of the Art Institute of Chicago's collection to focus on the representation of plants in classical, modern, and contemporary art. While it is not possible to reproduce the breadth and wealth of the tour, much of which revolved around student discussion, the examples and extracts that follow map the intricacies of symbolism and objectification that have characterized the history of plant representation in art. The discussions that formed the core of *Botanical Speculations* challenged past representational tropes to envision new ethical and aesthetic dimensions in which human-plant encounters could be staged.

## Correggio

*Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist*  
1515 – oil on panel

This type of Renaissance painting provides a good opportunity to understand how symbolism and objectification have intertwined in the production of representation that reduces plants to vehicles of human affairs. During the Italian Renaissance, a substantial shift in the representation of the natural world took place. This was partly caused by the revival of classical philosophy and science which pervaded the West. Beforehand, during the Middle Ages, realism ceased to be the privileged style in which to represent the world. During the second century, the *Physiologus* gathered pagan tales of animal stories infused with Christian morals and became the most adopted reference of iconographical sourcing in art. Its impact upon the epistemology of the natural world was defining and long-lasting. The book provided the visual and literary arts with many allegorical scenarios populated with fantastical animals and plants. The realism of classical art no longer mattered because the word of God had become the one and only lens through which the world could be seen and understood. Images became subjugated by, and dependent upon, God's

word alone. The representation of plants and animals became secondary—most regularly, animals represented the darker side of humanity. They posed threats and challenges as the manifestation of the irrational and the evil. Plants usually served as a backdrop. Besides the tree of knowledge, around which the original drama of humanity unfolded, the rest of the vegetal world was transfigured by the word of God into a mass of generic conglomeration of shapes and forms that more often only fill a void in the representational plane.

Thereafter, the resurgence of realism as a celebration of God's creation changed the history of plant representation in art. During the Renaissance artists' ability to capture the specific semblance of animals and plants was sought after as the skill to accurately record the great variety of the divine creation. The recovery of the empirical method of scientific inquiry, the rise of drawing from life, and the commercial drive which compelled artists to capture the semblance of the wealthy commissioners that paid for art, led to an unprecedented revolution of the gaze. The possibility to better and more accurately identify plants proposed a new symbolic order. Individual plants began to carry a signature—a specific symbolic seal that gave them a (human) voice.

In the case of this painting, it is not a coincidence that the Madonna should be sheltered by a lush trellis upon which a lemon shrub sprawls. The lemon is associated with the sun because of its coloration. During the Renaissance, lemons were considered efficient antidotes to poisons and served as disinfectant. These practical qualities were associated with the reparational and healing essence of the Virgin Mary as were its fragrant white flowers, which symbolized purity and tenderness.

Because of the meanings associated with it, the realism with which the plant was represented became a crucial feature in Renaissance painting—a misrepresented plant would compromise the iconography of the painting, misattributing qualities to a sacred figure. It is in this way that the paradox characterizing the representation of plants in western art unfolds: we see plants in paintings, but the symbolic order makes them invisible to us—it prevents us from focusing on them as active subjects in the painting and to discover anything important about their plant-being. It is in this sense that plants are, practically and metaphorically, always relegated to the background in western art; even when they seem to play a key role, they are flattened, reduced, and hollowed out.



[Fig. 0.1]

**Correggio**

*Virgin and Child with St. John the Baptist*, 1515. Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

**Louise Moillon***Still-Life with a Basket of Fruit and a Bunch of Asparagus*, 1630

and

**Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris***Trompe l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain*, 1658

Louise Moillon was an outstandingly talented artist whose ability to capture the minute details of animals and plants made her famous across Europe. The still-life genre emerged from the complex socio-political shifts that characterized the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The Protestant Reformation's objection to the representation of religious images caused artists to look elsewhere for their income. In the Netherlands, artists turned to the painting of still-life themes like game and flower arrangements as steady sources of revenue. While portraits had to be commissioned, paintings of flowers and fruits could be made and stored in the workshop, waiting for the visit of a passing buyer. It is therefore not surprising that still-life paintings were, in fact, religious images in disguise. In early modern Europe, Christianity was the powerhouse of symbolic meaning. The word of God was still intertwined with everything natural and everything natural appeared more than ever subjugated by God's power. Most regularly, flowers symbolized God's wealth and the transitory nature of beauty, and youth. But above all, still-life paintings functioned as *memento mori*: the reminder to remain humble for whatever riches one might accrue in life will be eventually taken away at God's will.

Flowers and fruits were thus juxtaposed following a strict symbolic order, rather than a realistic one. In many instances, still-life paintings disrespected the natural flowering cycles of the plants represented. All flowers and fruits appeared 'frozen' at the height of their beauty and freshness. Moreover, cut flowers were expensive and not available year-round. So, these paintings would enable the appreciation of the diversity of colors and shapes in the botanical world during the darkest depths of winter. The vast majority of flowers were lifted from botanical treatises and herbaria, which provided ready-made representations of plants and flowers to be assembled in always new and different compositions.

The canister painted by Moillon and the flower composition of Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris are classic examples of how symbolism and objectification of plants and fruits work. Moillon's composition alludes to the mature phase of life in which one harvests the fruits of a youth spent learning and perfecting skills and talents. But

accomplishment and fulfillment in life are, at this moment in time, always the reward of a fervent and devoted religious faith. It is thus that cherries alluded to the blood of Christ on the cross; grapes reinforced the importance of Christ's sacrifice and the holiness of the Eucharist; dark plums also underlined Christ's passion while peaches might have referenced the holy trinity. In his *Natural History*, Pliny asserted that peaches are constituted by the pulp, the stone, and the seed inside it. This observation, like many others from classical culture, was transposed and appropriated by Christianity. The bunch of asparagus on the foreground might be referencing prosperity and fertility since the plant shoots were considered a delicacy only few could afford. Counterparting asparagus, the peculiar fava pod containing only two beans might allude to prosperity, although in this specific case, the artist might be more directly referencing the sacredness of the family unit with the beans symbolizing the mother and the father and the peas their daughters and sons—another reference to the mature stage of life.

Given that the overall meaning of the painting is imbued with references to death and to the passion of Christ, it is perhaps not a surprise that a black fly should be spotted sitting on a grape. At the time this painting was made, the theory of spontaneous generation claimed that flies and other animals emerged directly from rotting matter. For this reason, flies represented death and decay—the reminder that death awaits all of us and that a life worth living can only be fulfilled by faith and devotion.

While flies were regularly hidden in still-life paintings, Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris's *Trompe l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain* bears the prominent depiction of a *Vanessa atalanta* butterfly. In this case, the butterfly alludes to the human soul. Its weightless grace was central to the classical myth of Psyche. But the Christian appropriation of the symbol focuses more on the metamorphic stages which it associates with the resurrection of the soul. In this still-life painting, the flowers and plants more distinctively allude to love and fidelity while the beautifully rendered curtain covering the right-hand side of the painting might be a reference to the unavoidable incumbency of death—the moment in which the curtain is drawn once and for all.



[Fig. 0.2]

**Louise Moillon**

*Still-Life with a Basket of Fruit and a Bunch of Asparagus*, 1630

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago





[Fig. 0.3]

**Adriaen van der Spelt/Frans van Mieris**

*Trompe l'Oeil Still Life with a Flower Garland and a Curtain, 1658*

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

**Carl Blechen***The Interior of the Palm House on the Pfaueninsel Near Potsdam, 1834*

and

**Franz Ludwig Catel***Inside the Colosseum, 1823*

These paintings prompt an interesting comparison between plants we cultivate and those we don't, and the cultural values we attribute to both categories. The exotic plants we see in Blechen's work are marked by the colonialist desire to possess and subjugate. The weeds in Catel's painting speak of past glories.

Greenhouses and botanic gardens originated during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when European kings and aristocrats displayed their wealth and power by gathering rare naturalia and precious artifacts. The cabinets of curiosities in which these objects were housed entailed a complex intermingling of knowledge, power, and economic wealth. To place nature in a delimited man-made space, be it live animals in menageries or taxidermy specimens in cabinets, had become the essential precondition of the emerging discipline of natural history. This power/knowledge matrix was carried forward in scientific endeavor that followed during the Enlightenment. Therefore, "knowing" never was a matter of purely personal pleasure or individual bettering; it was a means to acquire a more privileged social position through the economic gain knowledge itself affords; something which in turn generates prestige—a specific form of socio-charismatic identity-power.

The greenhouses that emerged in the seventeenth century, further crystallized these power dynamics—as an epistemological space in which nature was organized and managed, curiosity, aestheticism, and connoisseurship further distinguished the gentlemen from the peasant. Perishable and sophisticated luxuries like exotic flowers and fruits symbolically stood in opposition to the lowliness of lettuces, potatoes, and onions.

It is not, therefore, a surprise that the centerpiece of this painting should be a group of odalisques painted in the fashionable style of the time. Orientalism, the objectifying trope through which western artists imagined and constructed a magical, retrograde, and sensually unbridled east was the very telling manifestation of colonialist power relations. Male artists who painted odalisques never traveled to see the harems of Turkish sultans—they would have never been allowed in. Like a forbidden fruit,



the odalisque played a complex role in the desire of white gentlemen who dreamed of polygamy as a transgressive form of freedom from western “civilized” ways of living. Casting eastern women as “wild”, just like the plants which surround them, enabled and fueled a dream-economy in which plants and women appeared equally objectified as tokens in an escapist narrative written by patriarchy. Passivity is key. Like plants, these odalisques should remain silent and only provide pleasure within the objectified remit they are allowed to inhabit. Confined within the glass walls of the greenhouse and its utopian, heavenly suspension, plants and women, thus, fulfilled a fantasy in which the passification of the other appears purposeful, justified, and most importantly, beautiful. In this painting, the greenhouse no longer is just a means to the survival of displaced plants, but an apt metaphorical representation of the workings of the western mind.

Catel’s canvas provides a different, in many ways complementary, image of the relationship between patriarchal values and plants. In this painting, the artist immortalizes an all-male group busy contemplating and discussing the greatness of past classical glories. Plants aren’t the focus, yet their presence is essential. The Grand Tour was a prestigious opportunity for the aristocratic gentleman of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Traveling to Italy, Spain, Greece, and sometimes as far as North Africa, was an incomparable formative stage in the lives of the privileged.

Amongst the ruins of the Colosseum, the unkept growth of plants becomes central to the layered meaning inscribed in the painting. The ruins of the most famous Roman arena are covered in a variety of weeds—native plants that freely grow, untamed. Their spontaneity and lushness are a reminder of the historical value of the architectural remains—they highlight the loss of function and embody the sedimentation of historical memory. The weeds that grow everywhere around the Roman ruin, thus, function as a reminder of past glories humanity should aspire to.

In this scene, the implied intellect of the men represented in the foreground constitutes the rationalizing and redemptive force capable of seeing past the uncultivated growth that perturbs the rational clarity and functionality of classical architecture. But simultaneously, the lush growth alludes to the naturalization of classical culture itself—it reassesses its timelessness and its originality as the root of western culture.



[Fig. 0.4]

**Carl Blechen***The Interior of the Palm House on the Pfaueninsel Near Potsdam, 1834*

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago



[Fig. 0.5]

**Franz Ludwig Catel**

*Inside the Colosseum*, 1823

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago

**Claude Monet***Water Lilies*, 1906

The latter part of Monet's life was spent painting his garden in Giverny. He moved there in 1883 after his paintings found commercial success in the United States. Today, his water lilies are an art historical cliché—celebrated by the expert and venerated by the novice; this probably is the best known floral chapter in early modern art. However, despite the admiration for the near-abstract experimentations with color and brushstrokes, history of art has not dwelled much over the relationship between the artist and the plants. Monet was a fond horticulturalist. Not only would he tend to his plants personally with the help of assistants; he also experimented with hybridizing dahlias, irises, and poppies, a variety of which he called *Moneti*.

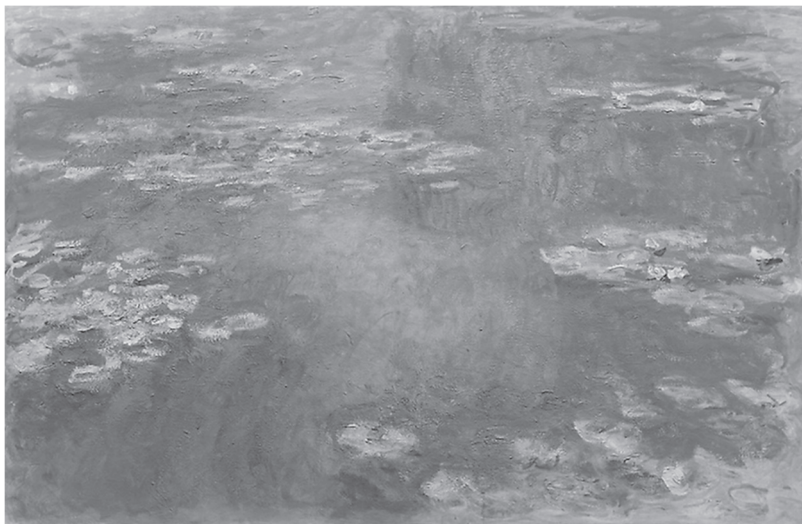
Monet's interest in water lilies began in 1889 when botanist Joseph Bory Latour-Marliac exhibited his hybridized specimens in the Trocadéro fountains at World's Fair in Paris. To that point, water lilies were only white, so it was inevitable that the yellow and pink varieties exhibited by Latour-Marliac would catch the artist's eye. We also know that many of his water lilies were cultivars imported directly from Egypt and South America. The town council opposed the import of the exotic varieties and ordered the artist to rip them up. He ignored them. There is something slightly perverse about this underexposed piece of knowledge: the idea that Monet's waterlilies, the quintessential romantic staple of bourgeois imaginary actually was the result of selective breeding and hybridization gives the paintings a new, and more modern edge. That they also broke the law makes their bold beauty even more seductive.

Monet's choice of subject matter for his many paintings was grounded in a personal passion for plants, rather than from the desire to convey encoded religious symbolism. From the very beginning, Impressionism rejected symbolism in favor of documenting the optical impression of everyday-life as conjured by its surfaces and the effects of light upon them. The lack of details in impressionist paintings meant that Monet never needed herbaria as source books for his work. Dialectics of color and light is all there is to see—the water lilies are transfigured: plant-being is dissolved through brushstrokes that become one with the water, the sky, and the foliage that surrounds them.

Let's not forget that Monet started to paint water lilies in 1897–99, at the very end of a century that saw a substantial fragmentation of artistic realities and movements in Europe. Through this period, realism in art became a political bone of contention—one equally ideologically

charged with highly conservative values or with revolutionary ideals. The invention of photography (1826) problematized matters further by materializing blurred/out of focus images right under the eyes of the artists. Blurred photographs, the failed attempts to capture optical reality during the mid-nineteenth century, were very inspirational to Monet and other Impressionists. What was at stake in this representational unclarity produced by the mechanical eye? To a degree, a process of de-objectification. Blurred photographs broke the straightforward linguistic connection between form and content—they inserted hesitation where once was affirmation. They shattered the sensual finitude of surfaces and focused on a broader overview of interconnectedness.

Epistemologically, this was a moment of paramount importance in the history of Western art—one that history of art usually simplifies through the notion of style or the biographical knowledge that Monet was losing his eyesight. But Monet's water lilies are amongst the very first paintings about plants and flowers to embody this new "freedom of the image." Open form and lack of detail-free the represented body from many economic, social, and cultural implications—Monet's water lilies appear interconnected with everything else around them: the sky, the water, the grass, the overhanging trees, and the human eye that perceives them. There are an eco-continuity and interconnectedness at play in these paintings that is unprecedented in the history of representation—one that simultaneously operates through the medium of paint as an ontological equalizer, and one that bypasses any notion of scientific epistemology in representation. In more than one way, it is with the water lilies that a truly modern, and perhaps more than modern history of plant-representation begins.



[Fig. 0.6]

**Claude Monet**

*Water Lilies*, 1906

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago



**Andy Warhol**  
*Flowers*, 1964

Andy Warhol's flower are another good example of how art history and the art historical marketing machine can oversimplify a subject matter in order to provide viewers with easily digestible pin-up images. But Andy Warhol's many iterations of flowers are more complex than it first might appear. As it is known, Warhol's trademark screen-print technique entailed appropriating images from the work of commercial or news photographers. This *modus operandi* involves an important conceptual dimension—it is the manifestation of the capitalist condition through which we know the world we live in. More often than not, our understanding of nature is mediated by images of animals and plants we see in magazines or on the screens of our TVs and computers. John Berger's 'Why look at Animals?' focused on this very contingency and how photography sets unattainable expectations of the natural world which inevitably diminish our less mediated encounters.

In the case of his flowers series, this very mediatedness is further problematized by the nature of the original image being used and what this image originally represented. The black and white shot used by Warhol was an image taken by Patricia Caulfield published in a 1964 issue of *Modern Photography*. Rather interestingly, it is not the photograph of a grassy field dotted by daisies, as many assume, but a composition of exotic hibiscus blooms woven into arranged straw—the table centerpiece at a Barbados restaurant.

That Warhol's engineering of the original image should fake a naturalness it never possessed is indicative of the alienation from plants which consumerism enables. In popular culture, flowers become patterns—anonymous blotches of color summoning a generic idea of naturalness through utter artificiality. It is in this sense that his multiple reproductions in different colors, none of which necessary belong to the hibiscus varieties in the paintings, constitute a further distancing from our conception of flowers and nature. With every repetition, the anonymity of the flowers becomes a referent of themselves and in themselves—nature is purely constructed for our aesthetic enjoyment.

In a way, Warhol's flowers embody the very essence of the many cultivars we buy from gardening centers around the world—the original size, shape, and color of the flowers altered to match our aesthetic expectations. Nature and culture effortlessly intermingle in the morphologies of these plants which have been redesigned to suit our purposes, please our gaze, and remind us that we ultimately have the ability to change nature at our will.



[Fig. 0.7]

**Andy Warhol**

*Flowers*, 1964

Courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago



# INTRODUCTION: BOTANICAL SPECULATIONS

GIOVANNI ALOI

This book gathers the proceedings of the symposium held in September 2017 at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. *Botanical Speculations* is the result of a year and half of research and preparation among faculty and students attending undergraduate and graduate courses at the school. It emerged from shared interests for the botanical world among faculty and students and it paved the way for more non-human/posthuman/Anthropocene dialogues to unravel.

Plants have for millennia served as the static backdrop of human dramas. Despite being some of the most indispensable pillars of our planet's biosystems, plants' fixity and laconic essence have meant that they can be wilfully overlooked, ignored, and written out of history, just like animals have. But more than animals, in popular conceptions, plants are ontologically aligned with "the resource" and "the medium" more than the living. They provide food and wood for our sustenance and infrastructure. Our relationship with them is predominantly based on disposability. We plant, grow, harvest and cut down as needed, rarely, if ever, considering what we could learn from our silent companions.

Abandoning the anthropocentric framework we have inherited from our parents and teachers during our formative years is not a simple task. State propaganda education films produced in Europe and the United States during the 1950s reconfigured our relationship to plants and environments through a pragmatic, capitalist framework in which trees and plants are nothing more than commodities to manage and resources to exploit. The message was clear: "manage the environment in order to grant your kids as a sustainable future". However, despite the good intentions, something in these propagandistic messages hasn't worked. Regardless of their immense biodiversity value, since the 1960's nearly half of the world's rainforest have been lost. It is estimated that every day, roughly 81.000 hectares, an area nearly 14 times the size of Manhattan, is destroyed to make space for agriculture and to produce timber. The rate of deforestation is such that about 36 football fields worth of trees are lost

every minute.<sup>1</sup> And of course, the destructive effects of deforestation are not limited to erosion and deterioration of soil or the loss of biodiversity. It is estimated that deforestation causes the loss of roughly 137 species of plants, insects and other animals every day.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 20% of the world greenhouse emission is generated by deforestation. The loss of trees has a deep impact on the hydrological system of this planet too. Cleared forest lead to drier local climates since water is no longer retained in their roots and foliage but evaporates straight into the atmosphere. This leads to desertification of the soil and vulnerability to flooding.

Although everyone's attention is focussed on melting glaciers, it is worth remembering that deforestation is a catastrophe of equal importance and one that vastly contributes to the phase of climate change that we are currently experiencing. On October 24<sup>th</sup> it was announced that the world entered a new era of 'climate change reality' defined by the crossing of 400 Co2 parts per million in the atmosphere—a level which will not dip for many generations.<sup>3</sup> This news was followed by the startling revelation that Arctic and Antarctic sea-ice reached record lows and that it is melting much faster than scientists had anticipated.<sup>4</sup> More recently, in July 2017 an iceberg twice the size of Luxemburg (5,800 km) broke off the Antarctic peninsula.<sup>5</sup> Despite the denial which seems to pervade the current US administration, signs that something is changing are undeniable. So, while the label 'sixth extinction' is widely being used to help us envision the gravity of the current changes in climatic balance, not much is actually known about how plants, upon which all biodiversity on the planet rests, will be affected. A 2015 study claims that

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<sup>1</sup> Bradford, Alina. (4 March 2015) *Deforestation: Facts, Causes & Effects*. Livescience.com. Retrieved 02/12/2018

<sup>2</sup> Rainforest Facts. Rain-tree.com (20 March 2018). Retrieved 02/12/2018

<sup>3</sup> Press Association, (2016) 'New era of climate change reality' as emissions hit symbolic threshold' in *The Guardian*, Monday, October 24<sup>th</sup>, online: [<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/24/new-era-of-climate-change-reality-as-emissions-hit-symbolic-threshold>] accessed on November 10<sup>th</sup> 2016

<sup>4</sup> Fountain, H. and Schwartz, J. (2016) 'Spiking Temperatures in the Arctic Startle Scientists' in *The New York Times*, Wednesday, December 21<sup>st</sup>, online: [<http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/21/science/arctic-global-warming.html>] Retrieved 12/21/2017

<sup>5</sup> Viñas, M-J. (2017) 'Massive Iceberg Breaks Off From Antarctica' in *Nasa website*, published on July 12<sup>th</sup>, online: [<https://www.nasa.gov/feature/goddard/2017/massive-iceberg-breaks-off-from-antarctica>] retrieved 07/30/2017

The effects of climate change on plant growth will likely vary by region, with northern areas in places like Russia, China and Canada gaining growing days. However, already hot tropical regions could lose as many as 200 growing days per year. In total, 3.4 billion people would live in countries that lose nearly a third of their growing days. More than 2 billion of those people live in low-income countries, according to the study.<sup>6</sup>

Focusing on plants, reconsidering the important roles they play in the biosystems of this planet, but also rethinking our everyday relationships with them lies at the core of the possibility for a better future if a future involving us is still on the cards. And part of the challenge involved in this future has been already extensively mapped by the philosophical discourses of human-animal studies, posthumanism, and the Anthropocene. The so-called "ontological turn" in the humanities has over the past twenty years revolutionized the ways in which we prioritize traditional conceptions of identity and objectification. The interconnectedness highlighted by the emerging fields of new materialism and multispecies ethnography have provided important food for thought. However, the scores of students and faculties riding this new and exciting philosophical wave still have to measure themselves with the challenges imposed upon us all by what Timothy Morton calls 'Dark Ecology', Mark Fisher's 'Capital Realism', Jason W. Moore's conception of the 'Capitalocene'.

More than ever before, questions of sustainability are underlined by a serious need to radically rethink our relationship with nature itself. In his critique of ecocritical theory, Timothy Morton has directly addressed the importance of rethinking environmental aesthetics. 'Dark Ecology,' the new aesthetic alternative to the sublime rhetoric of Romantic conceptions of nature, replaces affirmation with inquiry, certainty with doubt, exclusion with inclusion: the position of radical self-knowledge in which the concept of 'Dark Ecology' situates within a panoply of interdependent human-non-human natures.<sup>7</sup> This is a modality of representation that Bruno Latour already outlined in *Politics of Nature* as emerging from the catastrophic failure of the modern project at the hands of the planet's unexpected opposition.<sup>8</sup>

Slavoj Žižek has controversially pointed out that blaming ourselves for climate change constitutes a strategy designed to still maintain some sort of control over nature. "If it is us who are the bad guys,

<sup>6</sup> Worland, J. (2015) 'The Weird Effect Climate Change Will Have on Plant Growth' in Time, Thursday, June 11<sup>th</sup>, online: [<http://time.com/3916200/climate-change-plant-growth/>] Accessed November 2016

<sup>7</sup> Morton, T. (2016) *Dark Ecology*, (New York: Columbia University Press)

<sup>8</sup> Latour, B. (2004) *Politics of Nature*, (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press)

all we have to do is change our behavior,” he argues.<sup>9</sup> Against the persistent notion of stewardship which has characterized the conservation movement over the past hundred and fifty years, Žižek proposes a radical aesthetic change, one that accounts for human activity as part of the complex *naturecultures* that have unfolded over time. His provocative claim that we should feel at home spiritually, visually, and intellectually in a landfill rather than in a pristine forest constitutes a totally anti-sublime turn grounded in a deep mistrust for ecology’s purism. Žižek might be right on many accounts. But perhaps, the landfill may not be the most productive site around which to move forward in our undeniably problematic coevolution with ecosystems. Acknowledging the landfill as an essential manifestation of what we call progress would certainly help us to shake off our hubris. Surpassing disavowal is essential to our future on this planet, but what Žižek’s realism points to how impossible it is to cling to our past notions of nature in any productive way.

Posthumanist and Anthropogenic philosophical discourses take aesthetics seriously. They situate art and visual culture at the center of a complex crux between conscious and unconscious, rhetorical and realist, materialist and poetic. The ultimate alterity of plant-being necessitates a radical aesthetic reconfiguration to emerge along with new philosophical frameworks. It demands the will to change the way in which we look, the way in which we occupy space and time, and most importantly it entirely reconfigures our cognitive rhythms in order to reconnect us with biosystems through new modalities.

In a world hypered by the speed of media communication and technology, attuning ourselves to the fixity and relative slowness of plant-being might be one of the most important leaves we might take from the “plant book”. Snapping away from our objectifying approaches in order to consider plants as living organisms in their own right is another way to enrich a world that has been divested of its wealth by the utilitarianism of capitalism, the rhythms it imposes on us, and the hollowing of our abilities to focus and be-with other non-human beings. Plants invite us to connect to the world in many different ways, suggesting we’d look again and again at what we think we already know in order to discover infinite wealth in what society and mainstream culture is not interested in. Plants thus become an agent of political resistance – an icon of strength, resilience, and adaptability in a narcissistic world besotted by cheap entertainment

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<sup>9</sup> Žižek, S. (2013) ‘Slavoj Žižek: Ecology is the new opiate of the masses’ in *Dustysojourner.Wordpress*, online: [\[https://dustysojourner.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/slavoj-zizek-ecology-is-the-new-opiate-of-the-masses/\]](https://dustysojourner.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/slavoj-zizek-ecology-is-the-new-opiate-of-the-masses/) Retrieved 03/27/2017

and addicted to social media performativity. To reconsider our understanding of plants means to engage in a new process of discovery of them and of ourselves. How can we care about something we have been told is just a form sustenance or a source of aesthetic pleasure? How can we engage on new grounds with plants and the networks of human and non-human beings which they articulate?

Recent research on plant intelligence has focused on the traditionally anthropocentric notions of identity and sentience. We have subjected plants to the same epistemological violence we have imposed on animals. The arguments are the same, the metric is anthropocentrism, the one lacking is always the other... New technologies have enabled us to understand that individuals of some plant-species communicate to each other using their root systems; that plants under attack by parasites can release biochemical signals capable of attracting “companion insects” that will take care of the threat. More recently, a hormone which releases pain in stressed plant tissue has also been identified—this opens up the serious possibility for a notion of awareness and pseudo-sentience in plants to gain traction.<sup>10</sup> At this moment in time, we are at a critical junction. Philosophy has had the best part of twenty years to brush up with animal-being and come to terms with its alterity. The time has come to reconsider the role of philosophical poetics in the face of ethical urgency. If one is to write about an animal or a plant, let's make it as specific as possible and learn from the perspectives of other disciplines first. But it is still very common to sit through academic talks in which speakers claim to focus on plants only to realize their perspective is still fully anthropocentric. Plants are simply used as metaphorical placemarkers for human concerns. One minute philosophy's marginalization and totalization of plants is condemned and the next plants are turned into metaphorical objects fulfilling narcissistic philosophical acrobatics.

This also is a challenge art has to face. How can we set up a thinking space in which we can conceive plants and be with plants without inexorably falling into the classical anthropocentric tropes of the past? Since the 1960s contemporary art has attempted to surpass objectification to engage with nature in new and different ways. From the land art alterations of Robert Smithson to the political installations of Agnes Denes; the live horses in the gallery space of Janis Kounellis and the chirping finches of Mark Dion to the bioart experimentations of Suzanne

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<sup>10</sup> Worrall, S. (2016) ‘There is Such Thing as Plant Intelligence’ in *National Geographic*, online, February 21st, online [<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/02/160221-plant-science-botany-evolution-mabey-ngbooktalk/>] Retrieved 02/23/2018

Anker and Eduardo Kac. Contemporary art has been the most important arena in which to rethink that which initially seems to elude language and disciplinary lenses. In the gallery as laboratory; in the museum as a space for discussion and dialogue; and in the university as a place in which the two can be further problematized and critiqued, can emerge new perspectives that might just lay the path for new generations to avoid repeating the mistakes of the previous.

It is in this context that the symposium *Botanical Speculations* provided a space to rethink our relationship with plants through the conceptualism and open-endedness of different art forms. I organized this event in collaboration with “Conversations on Art and Science”, an initiative under the leadership of former SAIC President and current Chancellor Walter Massey which has greatly enriched the school’s multidisciplinary approach. The program comprised two full days of activities. The first, Thursday the 28<sup>th</sup> of September started with a guided tour of the Art Institute of Chicago in which along with 40 SAIC students, I explored the recurrent tropes of objectification employed by classical art and the de-objectifying approaches of contemporary artists. Flowers, leaves, fruits, and seeds have always ventriloquized religious meanings, romantic messages, and most regularly, have incarnated the ineluctable absent-presence of death. Moving on from this symbolic approach to plants constitutes one of the most important acknowledgments that plants are living beings in their own right and that they deserve our attention for what they are, not for what we can see reflected in them.

In the afternoon, we visited the Lincoln Park Conservatory, one of the oldest Victorian Era glass houses in the country, built between 1890 and 1895 which comprises four display halls and fifteen propagating and growing houses. There, a team of dedicated volunteers talked to us about plant biology and the environments they inhabit. Students were able to ask questions about specific species and learn about the history of individual plants that have been in the greenhouse since it first opened to the public.

The following day, Friday the 29<sup>th</sup> began with a screening of the cult film *The Secret Life of Plants*, a 1979 gem directed by Walon Green featuring a soundtrack and on-screen appearance by Stevie Wonder. The film was inspired by Peter Tompkins’ and Christopher Bird’s homonymous 1973 book and it is a true tour de force of visionary and imaginative conceptions of plant-life through time.

This book begins at the end of that screening with a roundtable involving many SAIC faculty and students along with Michael Marder, Ikerbasque Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz, who was the invited Keynote Speaker

for the day. Marder's invaluable philosophical contribution to the emergence of the field of critical plant studies remains an essential point of reference in the evolving discourses of the ontological turn. The SAIC faculty, students, invited speakers and audience, among other, from the University of Chicago, University of DuPage, Northwestern University, Harold Washington College spent the day mapping new multidisciplinary dimensions, testing art's ability to prod the boundaries of disciplinary approaches in order to see beyond ourselves.





# THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS

GIOVANNI ALOI

In 1966, Cleve Backster, a CIA interrogation specialist, hooked a galvanometer to the leaf of a dracaena sitting on his desk. To his surprise, the needle of the polygraph machine would rouse whenever he thought of burning the plant. On the grounds of this astonishing response, he proceeded to experiment with many other varieties and established that plants have an awareness of their surrounding which also involves an ethical dimension (most regularly displaying an aversion to violence towards other plants). His findings were first published in the *International Journal of Parapsychology* in 1968 and then popularized by a *New York Times* best seller titled *The Secret Life of Plants* by Peter Tompkins and Christopher Bird.<sup>1</sup> Backster's experiments could never be successfully replicated, yet the book tapped into a long-standing, and seemingly widespread desire to connect more deeply with our vegetal companions. Ultimately, a plant's silent, ultra-dependent, constant, impartial presence in the house makes it the perfect keeper of our secrets, passions, desires, fears, and hopes—perhaps a plant absorbs our anxieties and joy just as it absorbs Co2? The homonymous 1978 film inspired by the best seller develops these and more speculations into a strangely disjointed, sometimes contradictory, aesthetically non-sequitur, and most often involuntarily comical, new-age documentary. The film, certainly is one of a kind—a true hidden gem that despite the surprising participation of R&B megastar Stevie Wonder remains unknown, apparently because of copyright disputes surrounding the very soundtrack which released as a double vinyl in 1979. The film has also never been officially transferred on VHS and has entirely missed the DVD revolution of the 1990s. Unfortunately, it continues to remain idle in the age of digital streaming

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<sup>1</sup> Backster, C. (1968) 'Evidence of primary reception in plant life' in *International Journal of Parapsychology*, Volume X, n.4, Winter, pp.329-348 and Tompkins, P. and Bird, C. (1973) *The Secret Life of Plants: A Fascinating Account of the Physical, Emotional, and Spiritual Relations Between Plants and Man*, (New York: Harper Collins)

where pretty much anything filmed in the history of human kind finds its way onto a TV screen. Likely, at the time in which *Botanical Speculations* took place, a poor-quality transfer surfaced on YouTube, so we seized the opportunity to watch it with our students.

All in all, despite its many, undeniable flows, *The Secret Life of Plants* is lovable because of its naïveté and its visionary ability to convey faith and enthusiasm for what might lie beyond the gaze of scientific certainty. Released at the very edge of the materialistic boom which made the 1980s the loudest and least spiritual decades of the last millennium, this thoroughly unconformist film revels with determination into an existential question which ultimately encompasses more than the vegetal world.

Through glorious moments of lapse-time photography displaying the utter beauty of germinating seedlings and unfolding buds; chopply edited footage that looks as if illegally borrowed from National Geographic documentaries; and extremely odd sequences in which scientists recklessly murder cabbages in order to test their sentience, memory, and ethics (!) *The Secret Life of Plants* is as exuberant as it is open-ended. How much of it is intended to be serious and how much is deliberately absurd? As the line between art and science is blurred repeatedly through this fascinating journey, one is left wondering if the non-sequitur collage stitched together by Stevie Wonder's experimental soundtrack might be a very apt metaphor to the speculative nature of the enquiry. For its experimental score, Wonder produced an eclectic mix of prog-soul-ambient-R&B that still transcends easy characterization today. Sometimes, his instrumentation underscores anthropomorphic sequences; at others, it further abstracts and obscures the objectivity of documentary material. But interestingly, Wonder still remembers the film as one of the most exciting and creative moments in his career because the experimental nature of the project brought him to challenge himself to express and embody something of the "Venus's Flytrap to Earth's creation to coming back as a flower". In a sense, we can dare to say that the singer performed forms of becoming-plant right across the whole film. And what a cunning metaphor that it should be Stevie Wonder to be prominently featured as the musical *fil rouge* of this film. Throughout, his presence is enigmatic and polysemic. His blindness seems, at times, to allude to the radical otherness of plant perception.

Ultimately, *The Secret Life of Plants* delivers snapshots and offers spectacular visions; at times we are shocked and then oddly comforted. But in its inconclusive randomness, the film surely accomplishes one thing: the doubt that we might be spending our time on

this planet missing out on the secret life of plants, casts an unequivocal sense of ancestral loss over the final credits roll.



# THE SECRET LIFE OF PLANTS: A ROUNDTABLE

GIOVANNI ALOI, CAROLINE PICARD,  
JOSHI RADIN, JENNY KENDLER,  
MICHAEL MARDER, FALAK VASA  
AND ANDREW YANG



[Fig. 0.8]

*The Secret Life of Plants Roundtable*, 2017 © SAIC

**Giovanni Aloï:** Welcome everybody, I'm Giovanni Aloï, Lecturer in Modern and Contemporary Art at SAIC and Editor of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture*.

**Caroline Picard:** I'm Caroline Picard, curator and writer. I am the director of Sector 2337 and the Green Lantern Press in Logan Square.

**Joshi Radin:** Joshi Radin, MFA graduate, current MA and Visual and Critical Studies candidate, artist, writer, collaborative member of *A Program for Plants*, and current Dangler Fellow at the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Jenny Kendler:** I'm Jenny Kendler, MFA 2006. I'm an environmental artist, artist-in-residence with environmental non-profit Natural Resources Defense Council, and a collaborative member of Deep Time Chicago.

**Michael Marder:** Hello, I'm Michael Marder, Ikerbasque research Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country in Spain and I've been working quite a bit on vegetal philosophy. It's a pleasure to be here, thanks to Giovanni.

**Falak Vasa:** Hi everyone my name is Falak Vasa, I'm the BFA with VCS thesis program. I work mostly in performance, video, photo.

**Andrew Yang:** Hi, I'm Andrew Yang and I'm an associate professor here at SAIC, I teach classes in both art and science.

**Aloi:** Great, I guess we're ready. Does anyone want to start with a question? Yes, Nancy.

**Nancy (audience):** I just wanted to say that I was really struck by the section of the film in which the Dogon tribe talked about their relationship with Sirius. How they can't really see the star with their eyes but know it exists. The sentence: "The eyes can't see it, but the spirit sees it," is particularly meaningful in the context of this symposium. It is making me wonder if this could be a key to our impossibility to understand plants too. Could it be that in removing ourselves from nature and by surrounding us with our built environment we might have progressively lost the capacity the Dogon still have to "see" nature and the cosmos beyond optical vision?

**Aloi:** Yes, I found that section very fascinating too for the same reason. The Dogon tribe seems to hold a remnant of our attunement with the non-human world—something we have most likely lost through millennia of alienation from nature itself. How could they possibly know about a star they can't see with the naked eye? In a sense, the Dogon's ability to see beyond their sight is a challenge to the anthropocentric hubris we have nurtured since the enlightenment in science and phenomenology in philosophy.

**Kendler:** I think the film itself is really interesting as a record of a moment in time, illuminating the way people were thinking about their interaction with the natural world in the '70s. The film was made at the dawn of the environmental movement in the United States, when we were first talking about *Limits to Growth*, Earth Day, endangered species and Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*. We can see that while there's many compelling elements in the film, there's also a problematic exoticism that's perpetuated, not only with the depictions of the human beings that are featured in the film, but also in the way that people are relating to the natural world.

Nonetheless, I think that rather than reject the film out of hand, it's more interesting to try to find what we may still be able to use from this palette. I think the inherent ethos behind the problematic, 'touchy-feely' aspects of the film—this desire to 'see with the spirit,' this longing for a kinship or oneness—to have deeper emotional relationship with the natural world—is not something we should reject.

But I think, unfortunately, culturally, Americans did largely reject what came to be seen as this perhaps uncomfortable desire for closeness, which conflicted so deeply with our cultural and economic system. We pushed it down and away, marginalizing the nascent environmental movement as a kind of 'unserious tree-hugger foolishness'—at least in our country—and so I think it's really interesting to think about ways to reclaim what is very good about this desire for closeness by re-investigating it through a more objective scientific lens.

An interesting contemporary counterpoint to this film might be the new book by Peter Wohlleben, *The Hidden Life of Trees*. This book illuminates many of the same sorts of 'almost miracles' of how plants can communicate with one another, share nutrients, change the climate, control predation on their offspring—but it explains itself and supports these claims with objective study and science. Many of the examples of 'plant miracles' we just saw in the *The Secret Life of Plants* were debunked later on, especially this very popular idea that talking to plants or caressing plants is helping them. The supposed study many are familiar with showing that plants like classical music was found to be completely fabricated, and we now know that touching plants tends to be detrimental, as plants take this as a precursor to predation and slow their growth, generally in order to increase production of protective chemical deterrents.

**Aloi:** Just a point about the book you mentioned, Jenny, *The Secret Life of Plants*. It is interesting to see how the contribution that book had to make has also been diminished by many critics. It has attracted considerably of

harsh criticism because of the anthropomorphism that characterizes its methodological framework. This observation brings us back to the beginning of this film which started off with the challenging proposal that science still has a difficulty to accept certain ideas about the non-human world.

**Marder:** Yes, I think your question goes exactly to the heart of this issue of what is the secret in *The Secret Life of Plants*, right? Parts of the film show that the real secret is not so much in the plants themselves but about humans and about the human relation to plants. The question is about the way in which knowledge is constructed, so we have an attempt at an alternative production of knowledge that might not follow traditional scientific lines but need validation. It complies with what we think of as the production of knowledge in the West, but at the same time, the kind of secret that plants are supposed to yield is still very much in line with this Western desire to extract meaning from things. To go deep into the object and to extract that hidden kernel of meaning out of it and exploit it for our own purposes. Whether the purposes are economic, as in agriculture or whether they are aesthetic, as in making our world more pleasant, more beautiful, and so on through plants...

But the notion of the secret is undeniably a recurring trope in our contemporary discussion about plants. What interests me is how can we think of something like a secret, something that is hidden and yet not defined by that interiority concept. How can we produce knowledge without pursuing the extraction of a kernel of meaning? I think that phenomenology, that Giovanni has mentioned, gives us some of the theoretical tools to do that, to look at the surface of things at the superficialities that they're so obvious that they are overlooked and to find what we can call a secret or something that has been obscured on the surfaces without enucleating, as it were, that being.

**Yang:** I think that in both, Michael and Jenny's, comments there's a real tension between this first-hand subjective or spiritual experience people are having of these plants. But then this real deep desire to then have it confirmed by science. So that there's always this tension between the pureness of personal experience, and yet some hope it can be validated by impersonal, scientific methods. I was really fascinated by that in this documentary.

Another thing about the secret, or the hidden meaning, or the kernel, is that there seems to be some insistence that somehow meaning is non-material. There's going to be some wavelength, something that can't



be otherwise detected. They talk about the parapsychology of plant and animal communication, but there's no reference to the fact that we are also exchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide with these plants in the same room. That materiality never comes into play. It's always this non-material, non-corporeal kind of communication through parapsychology. I think that fixation is really interesting. It tends towards the whole notion that somehow the spiritual realm is the non-material realm, and then the earthly and terrestrial realm is this other one. That isn't consistent throughout the film, but I think that that's another thread.

**Picard:** It's interesting to map the film's criteria. For instance, to look at the role that machines play—their ability to record and therefore legitimize something beyond human perception of a human-plant interaction. To Andy's point, it seems like we want the machine to register something immaterial and yet specific—maybe moments of empathy. For instance, if the plants respond to the death of another creature or to an image of fire, then suddenly we can relate to plants on a particular moral level—we're projecting an emotional empathy.

I began to think about how the film's experiments have an intrinsically western Christian point of view: looking at the plant, one is able to go back to the garden. In the garden, you start to connect to other cultures and there's, again, this desire to find not only that the plants can communicate linguistically but beyond that, the plant's seed is mystically connected to the cosmos. The seed contains a deep and secret knowledge that's going to give us the meaning of life.

**Aloi:** Yes, I agree too that the Dogon tribe section is very interesting. However, it clearly also is a primitivist cliché. It is situated at the end of the documentary and it is providing a sort of resolution after all the seemingly extravagant or far-fetched ways in which the west is attempting to reconnect with plants through technology, we are shown a “primitivist” example. It's interesting and problematic at the same time. It's about the origin, another type of kernel, and it is about the myth of the noble savage too, in a sense.

**Radin:** I echo your sentiments that it's this desire to recover the fallen self, the fallen, desolate, the urbane, severed and out of touch, accelerated human that can no longer read this language or integrate itself into the so-called natural world and that that desire at that time took that expression, but it's still salient and still active now. From my personal experience, going to live on a “back-to-the-land hippie commune”, was one instance of

that time period where people were so cynical about institutions and politics that they felt compelled to find some way to recover a relationship with other plants and species.

**Kendler:** I think it's interesting how this film really wants to give us an easy answer to that, right? This is clearly still a question that's interesting—and necessary—to re-confront. To look at the historical moment again, there was this intense anthropomorphism, leveraged in a truly unsubtle way. This film is really not so much about plants as it's about us.

I love the scene with the horticulturalist who's convinced that his plants respond to his emotions: they look healthy when he's happy, and they do poorly when he's sad. It's as if we *don't really* want to know about plants, we just want them to be a mirror for us and our emotions. I think it's important to confront this impulse to default to such a solipsistic, self-serving view of the natural world, but I'd like to do it in a way where we don't reject the emotional or the idea of anthropomorphism as something useful.

I think this is something that happened in the '70s in both science and in culture, that we need to push back against. Yes, we should try to understand this deep otherness in the vegetal realm, but we can't do it by looking in a mirror. Perhaps in nature, we do see, through a glass darkly, a reflection of ourselves, but that's the smallest extent of what's there within this vast otherness, and we do a disservice by allowing ego and human exceptionalism to block our view. We need new ways of seeing and new methodologies of approach to understand this deep green realm.

**Yang:** Yes, I just want to follow up on that because I was thinking through that tension of anthropomorphism and its remarkable self-conceit, but also about necessity. It made me think to just how radical Carl Linnaeus's proposition that plants had sex was considered in his time. Anthropomorphism allowed Linnaeus to see the fundamental connection between sex and reproduction in the plant world as well. He talks about the sex life of plants very much in the frame of human sexuality, not just animal sexuality, but human sexuality. That's why his theory was so controversial, it seemed almost salacious.

I think there's this tension in the history of science saying that it's really hard to find a way into that space of some other being or some other realm without using a metaphor. Analogy is an essential means of access, but then when do you know that you have to finally stop being so metaphorical, to avoid fantastical projection in the anthropomorphic

sense? There's a really fine line between the necessity of analogical thinking for the scientific imagination, but then its drawbacks in terms of turning the non-human into just another humanized construct.

I just want to say one more thing: how important was the soundtrack to you?

[laughter]

Because I felt Stevie Wonder's music was important for me in this film. I was at this conference with the biologist Lynn Margulis a few years ago and she was showing a group of historians of science a time lapse film footage of bacteria, mold, and plants.

She couldn't get the sound to work. She kept on trying to show the video and the soundtrack wasn't working, kind of like how it happened for us today. She was so upset, and she said: "You're not going to get it if the music isn't working. If the music is not playing, you're not going to see what you need to see." All these historians of science and scientists in the room were really confused and annoyed by that. They were like, "What are you talking about? Music should have nothing to do with whether we can observe objectively what you're trying to show us in this video that you took in your lab?" But she was so insistent.

I just want to mention this in terms of affect and how important it can be. I think that was what they were getting at in the film - the affect of plants, one's own relationship with plants as important to gaining meaningful knowledge.

**Vasa:** Yes, I was also thinking about the music and the first thing that came to my mind was *2001: A Space Odyssey*: it's this like really slow crescendo. Except that when the crescendo comes to an end, another starts, when that one ends, another one begins... I think there were at least four moments in that movie when I thought it was about to end, but it went on and on...

That moment the sound went out made me think about how much of a role temporality played in the actual viewing of the film. There were interesting slow-motion moments juxtaposed to the hyper accelerated growth of a plant. It somehow seemed as if we could appreciate a new relativity in these temporalities. Sometimes the soundtrack took on a more literal tone, suggesting that these vegetal beings might be dancing to a tune that human beings have constructed through anthropomorphism, thus forcing these movements into natural forms we find aesthetically appealing.

Also, to relate to what was said earlier, the least interesting thing about it is plants. I think it is more about it human beings. I've been thinking a lot about the epistemological function of science and the colonial ideologies that are perpetrated through pseudoscience and just how those ways of thinking enter the everyday. This is all very interesting to me as well.

**Aloi:** Can I ask your opinions on the “cabbage murder” scene? I wasn’t quite expecting that level of drama—then, all of a sudden, it was murder! So, as the narrative has it, one plant was murdered, the nearby one was aware of the event and was thereafter able to sense the presence of the aggressor in the room. It seemed deliberately comedic, but I’m not quite sure about the unfolding of events and how the measurements were being collected in order to establish this plant-awareness and ethical dimension, dare I say!

**Yang:** I thought the cabbage murder part was a performance. An artistic performance, I guess. It's cool that they had the red triangle, the black square, and the red circle on the back of the humans so that you could identify each of the possible perpetrators in this line up. I thought that was absolutely amazing.

**Picard:** Again, if you can prove that the plant has a sense of justice, then ergo it is conscious.

**Aloi:** Ethics.

**Picard:** Yes, ethics—exactly. There is a desire to find a common language with non-humans. There was an article I read a couple years ago that said, “Guess what? A tree at one part of the forest transmits messages to another part of the forest when it is on fire.” That’s awesome and super interesting but the human still has to translate that transmission in relation to justice or danger: as though we can only measure communication in reference to common, human theoretical concepts. We are afraid of being burned and empathize with the tree in that capacity.

I wonder if part of why we have to make these translations is because in fact it's nearly impossible to maintain focus on what's strange about plants and the way that they actually move, the way they actually exhibit agency, and even the strange ways that resist being parsed or empathized with.

**Marder:** To this point, what is important about plants is that they question temporalities. To me, it boils down to the asynchronicity of a human experience and what you could call a plant experience. This would be an important feature, not just because we are talking about time, but because time is constitutive of being. If we live in two different time dimensions, two different modes of reacting or lengths of reaction, then, we really are two different beings. Our modes of being also diverge. There can be, of course, convergences with a rapid firing of electrical signals, in our neurones and some plant cells.

This is one of the strange things about the film: some of its content has become very solidly substantiated plant science as in, action potentials, the rapid firing, quasi-neuronal firing of cells, as in the Venus Fly trap, for instance. But, then, these portions are mixed with so much that has been discredited and it's difficult to separate the two epistemologies. I talked to Michael Pollan about this. His opinion, of course, is that the book, more than the film, was a setback for plant science, exactly because it clothed all of the covered scientific research into layers of paranormal, [laughs] para-activity.

The other point I was going to make, returning to the question of anthropocentrism, is that the film exemplifies the very strange notion of anthropocentrism. Usually, in anthropocentrism, we see human as a pinnacle of the world and everything else is inferior. This structure resembles the great chain of being. But here, we have the exact opposite. The film suggests that plants can have emotions, can empathize better than humans because they are more sensitive than we are. There is a presumption, perhaps an erroneous one, that plants are ultimately superior to all human things. This, I think, is the twist that is unique to the film's approach to anthropocentrism.

**Picard:** Yes, and maybe alien. I guess that is kind of awesome.

[laughter]

**Yang:** Yes, because they make that comment about plants being more rational, the possibility of plants being more rational than humans. Maybe it's my own bias, but sometimes I think the real virtue of non-human creatures is that *they are* irrational. Or better, they don't preoccupy themselves with the distinction between the rational and the irrational.

Perhaps we do exist in a different temporality than plants in one sense, but at the same time, I eat plants. I actually have this deep material intimacy with the plants. We exist in that shared temporality and our

bodies have this deep, deep intimacy. My body is made of all those plant atoms. But again, that kind of materiality doesn't come in to this film at all. It's all in this space of the non-material and ethereal – in that sense, of the “mind” and not the “body.” I think that focus of the non-material “mind” or feeling is connected to the film’s fixation on rationality. It seems like the ambition is to make plants non-vegetal, but in doing so, they divorce them from their material being.

**Marder:** Yes, and then we have this sort of contradiction: the idea that plants will rationally could eventually even control the methods of their own agricultural production. But the film doesn't really raise the question of how one could ethically consume such rational subjects, right? The plants are grown in hot houses they control for the purpose of being eaten and consumed by humans?

**Kendler:** Right, much less murder a brine shrimp. [laughs]

**Christiaan (audience):** What do you actually think about eating plants?

**Kendler:** Well, I think we've established that the film is full of contradictions, right? [laughs] That doesn't even begin to cover it. For example, in the way technology and machines operate in the film. There's this vilification. We see the imagery of the smokestacks and a depiction of a dirty, aggressive, mechanistic society. Then we also see machines become the translator to the ephemeral, spiritual realm. I think there's a lot that's really unprocessed here. Yes, in terms of how do we talk about eating plants? I think, well, firstly, we can say that the plants are not “loving us back” in the way that the film is proposing that they might.

**Aloi:** There also is an ethic-epistemological problem with discussing a non-human subject in an academic setting and also considering the actual consumption of it. Being critical of something and eating that something don't seem to go together. For instance, when I attend conferences with colleagues who work in animal-studies, the buffet is all vegetarian and vegan. At one point, a vegetarian animal-studies scholar warned another that they shouldn't be eating the subject of the conference at the conference. And in a sense, I can see that there might be a point in that. It is strange but it's part of our cultural construct and it probably has something to do with the approaches and methodologies of science. You can do so much in the laboratory, but you don't end up eating your subject of studies. It's a very interesting exclusivity. It's almost as if the act of

eating the object of inquiry diminishes the quality of knowledge that can produce from it.

**Marder:** You're producing a different kind of knowledge altogether. It's another thing.

**Kendler:** A different consumption.

**Marder:** A different consumption that operates exactly according to the same mechanism of digesting, analyzing, breaking down into the minutest components, because this is our scientific model of knowing. It's exactly a kind of immaterial digestion that has very deep theological roots as well. Because, for instance, for St. Augustine, God was this big stomach, an immaterial stomach that preserved everyone, so that when one eats a piece of the body of Christ in the Eucharist, one is actually digested into God and preserved in the memory of God in this immaterial stomach.

To the question "Does one eat the subject of one's thought or of the conference that you attend?" I think the idea there—with God out of the picture—would be that you can legitimately do so if your notion of inter-subjectivity includes mutual consumption, mutual ingestion, right?

[laughter]

**Kendler:** Right, and we will be consumed in turn. Yes, of course.

**Yang:** Yes, right. You will be consumed in return. I think there's a tension there and it also depends what mode of science you're engaged in. Some more old-school scientists actually hold very firm to the idea that you have to eat your subject of study because if you don't, you don't really know it.

Once I was interviewing to go to graduate school and I was at University of Texas. In this one ecology lab I was visiting we were having lunch and then a group of lab members come in and they throw a bunch of dead ducks on the table. Half of the lab was like, "What are you doing?" They said, "We just went duck hunting." Half of the lab was upset - they were vegetarians. The hunters argued that "Hey we study duck biology. In figuring out the ecology of ducks, we're going to also hunt ducks and eat them and be part of that ecology."

**Kendler:** Yes, I think we need to always resist this push toward simplification. When we first began to engage as a society in the conversation around ecology, this was what we got: something very

polarizing, very simplified, and very much using wish fulfillment ...“my plants love me, they understand me”... So how do we complicate this, without cutting off or denying those real emotions we humans feel, or want to feel, towards the natural world? If we're talking about translation, this recognition of complexity doesn't mean there's no possibility of translation, but how do we move forwards accepting the true otherness of what we're dealing with?

Translation is often the first step in any boundary crossing. But we have to know that there is always slippage as we try to step across this line. We have to understand that our position as the observer—or the eater—gives us a particular subjective stance—and accept also the poetry that comes with that. What is the music of the new film that illuminates this complicated, entangled, much more nuanced way of relating to plants, where perhaps anthropomorphism is one instrument we can use to more deeply investigate our relationship with plants? What is the poetry or music that that allows us to get where we need to go? I think this emotion; this poetry is okay—maybe even necessary—as long as we're working towards recognizing our own nature and our own being-ness as we're trying to investigate this other being-ness.

**Aloi:** I guess this is a great point on which to wrap up as time has run out. Since you mentioned poetry, a really important consideration to draw is how to use the cultural tools at our disposal as bridges instead of repressing our ability to build those bridges? Then of course those bridges would change according to the relationship between the two poles in the conversation, which I guess it's what makes art about and with the non-human so interesting and exciting. What's at stake is not just understanding the non-human differently, it's actually also seeing what happens to that bridge as we try to reach the non-human and back, because the dimension is not one-way only anymore.





[Fig.G-1]

**Marshmallow Laser Feast**

*In the Eyes of the Animal*, Installation, 2015 © Marshmallow Laser Feast



[Fig.G-2]

**William Pope.L**

Installation view of *Trinket* at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, CA, 2015, Courtesy of the artist; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest © Pope.L



[Fig.G-3]

**Lindsey French**

*Smelling Salts for Dinner Party* (process documentation), custom smelling salts with essence of spinach, bergamot, thyme, and violet, sealed with beeswax and served in the shell of a quail egg, 2017, photo: Lindsey French © Lindsey French



[Fig.G-4]

**Rashid Johnson**

*Antoine's Organ*, mixed media, Hauser and Wirth, NYC, 2016. Courtesy the Artist and Hauser and Wirth. Photo: Martin Parsekian © Rashid Johnson





[Fig.G-5]

**Aimée Beaubien**

*Twist Affix*, 2017. Cut-up inkjet prints, vintage c-prints, paracord, carabiners, miniature clothespins, oscillating fan, grow lights on fabric cord with dried gomphrena, eucalyptus, lemons, limes, and fallen acorns. Dimensions variable © Aimée Beaubien



[Fig.G-6]

**Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride**

*A Confounding Mimicry* at the Lincoln Park Conservatory for Experimental Sound Studio, 4-channel sound with 14 accompanying signs in English & Spanish (Installation Detail), 2017  
 © Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride



[Fig.G-7]

**Ana Mendieta**

*Tree of Life*, 1976, Lifetime color photograph 20 x 13.25 inches (50.8 x 33.7 cm) ©  
The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.





[Fig.G-8]

**Ash Wolfe**

*Plant Domain*, mixed media, 2017 © Ash Wolfe





[Fig.G-9]

**Amber Ginsburg and Sara Black**

*Witness Tree*, mixed media, 2017 (detail) photo: Charles Roderick © Ginsburg/Black



[Fig.G-10]

**Falak Vasa**

*Kuzu and I*, polaroid from trip to Lake Geneva, 2015 © Falak Vasa



[Fig.G.11]

**Ashley Gillanders**

*Untitled (Tulips Blooming)*, archival inkjet print, 2017 © Ashley Gillanders



# CHAPTER ONE

## PLANT-THINKING: CONTEMPORARY ART REVOLUTIONS

GIOVANNI ALOI

### *Amarcord*<sup>1</sup>

Plants on the table, plants on the floor, plants on chairs, plants hanging on the walls, plants perched on windowsills, plants spilling on either side of the balcony railings—my grandmother's terrace was a miniature forest in its own right, or at least, so it seemed to me. I was 5. From my lower than average viewpoint, her balcony was a true wilderness: one with its mythologies, enchanted inhabitants, unrepented villains, and secret passages. A climbing jasmine, a honeysuckle, different varieties of pansies, variegated petunias, the sculptural dish-like foliage of leopard plants, red geraniums, deep red gloxinias, tall ferns, fuzzy fern-asparagus, a giant rubber plant, slender orange and yellow zinnias, African daisies, sharp mother in law tongues, dark-leaved Irish roses, two small palms, nasturtium, nasturtium, nasturtium, and a bonsai-like money-tree were only some of the many plants she grew there. These varieties did not come from fancy gardening centres.

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<sup>1</sup> The first section of this introduction is titled after Federico Fellini's film *Amarcord* from 1973. The film proposes a fragmented narrative in which the idiomatic of film is made to function as a repository of childhood memories. Vignettes dotted by colorful characters alternate each other in the piecing of a time gone that was not necessarily better than the present, but that surely seemed magical as seen through the dimension of memory. The film thus acknowledges that memory is a temporally defined space in which places, people, non-humans, and narratives are constructed in specific ways that vastly differ from other perceptual instances. To highlight this specificity Fellini created the neologism *amarcord*, which echoes the word *ricordare*, to remember, and *amar* which could equally allude to *amaro* which translates in bitter, and *amare*, to love. Fellini, F. (1973) *Amarcord*, (dist. PIC Distribuzione / Warner Brothers)

Her botanical collection was assembled between the 1960s and the 1970s and was at its peak in the early 1980s. Each plant had a story: almost all came from local friends or family members. My grandmother's passion for plants was well-known in the Calabrian small village, Italy's deep south, where she lived. It was therefore not unusual for a friend to come around for coffee—always unannounced—with a cutting wrapped up in wet cotton wool or sticking out of a small container of some sort. Small size terracotta pots were not readily available, and plastic ones were rare too, so anything from an empty coffee tin, to a jam jar, or a well-rinsed tuna tin could do. My grandmother would duly transplant the cuttings into bigger containers, but tins and jars would always stay around. She needed them to reciprocate vegetal gifts at the earliest opportunity. So, some small plants would spend prolonged periods of time growing out of a beans tin, waiting for the next family friend to stop by.

Cuttings were part of an open-ended botanical-dialogue among plants, people, balconies, and gardens. Giving cuttings was a deep sign of affection—a heartfelt gift—a sharing of something personally treasured to whose growth and well-being a person had directly contributed over time. Care was inscribed in this gift on two levels: in the act of giving and in the gift itself. In time, the plants would become place-markers for memories, special occasions, alternative family genealogies, births, and deaths. They were much more precious than any plant bought at the market on the streets behind the church. Biologically, these plants were most regularly 'old varieties', some of which could not be found, or were never available, in the commercial realm at the time. There was a sense of magic to those gifts—some plants would acquire mythical status. You'd regularly hear that such and such had a blue variety of this usually white flowering plant; or that an elusive giant strand of this or that had been sighted, somewhere, in someone's garden many moons ago.

My grandmother and other relatives had a few plants that, they claimed, came from cuttings gifted to them by the richest woman in town. She was only ever referred to as 'the Baroness' and lived in a beautiful villa a couple of miles inland. My grandmother helped with the housekeeping. The building was surrounded by acres of land planted with bergamot, figs, and olive trees—that was partly where her wealth came from. A giant palm grew next to the building, granting a stately demeanour. She lived in Milan for most of the year and only stayed at the villa during the summer months. The Baroness loved plants and regularly shipped rare and expensive varieties down south from the most prestigious gardening business in Italy: The Fratelli Ingegnoli. The business opened its doors in 1789 and pioneered crossbreeding as well as genetic

manipulation techniques in Italy.<sup>2</sup> Their catalog was simply jaw-dropping: amongst others, it featured utterly beautiful exotic varieties, and rare European strands of sought after roses. My great-aunt owned a mesmerizing wholly white tropical hibiscus, claimed to be from the Baroness' own collection built through the Fratelli Ingegnoli catalog—she was very proud of it and would not make cuttings from it very often. I remember looking at those pure-white flowers against the dark green foliage—it was somewhat unreal—the unicorn of flowering shrubs—I have never encountered another one ever again, anywhere.

But my grandmother didn't seem to be preoccupied with notions of rarity just as much as she was not concerned at all with a systematic approach to her collection—and that is what made her gathering of plants so interesting and unique. She deeply loved them and regularly anthropomorphized them. Her plants could be 'sad,' or they would 'smile at her,' or could be 'annoyed with her'. To a certain degree, it was all knowingly humorous. Despite the popular culture stereotype that casts those who love plants as lonely lunatics, my grandmother was the center of the family—she was deeply loved. There was something fascinating about her enjoyment of plants that surpassed the simple notion of 'hobby' or 'past-time.' They made her world so rich. She cared for them on the grounds of this joy they brought to her life. She loved them just as much as she loved animals. She never liked captivity—most of her pets came and went as they pleased. Like plants, they were usually brought to her by friends and family—a nestling bird found under a tree and unable to fly, or a bird with a broken leg, or mangled wing due to a window collision. She would take care of them and release them thereafter—some of them would stick around for a while. I remember that, for years, a magpie would come back to visit after being cared for by her as a chick. My mom remembers an owl that, well before my time, used to come back to visit almost every evening. It is safe to say that when it came to plants and animals, my grandmother instinctively operated a flat ontology of some sort—an ontological orientation of compassion for the non-human that much anticipated contemporary philosophical concerns in the posthuman sphere.<sup>3</sup> Today, at the tender age of 41, as I continue to cultivate my own

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<sup>2</sup> Gandini, G. (2004) *I Locali Storici di Milano*, (Milano: Touring Editore), pp.68-69

<sup>3</sup> The term flat ontology is used in reference to Object Oriented Ontology theorist Graham Harman and his intent to avoid overmining as well as undermining objects in philosophical discourses. Flat ontology is a challenge to the intrinsic anthropocentrism of correlationsim, and it involves an invitation to forget what we already know about objects to attempt to see beyond the cultural connotations that



interest for plants and animals, I consider myself lucky to have been exposed to her influence.

But back then, things were different. Towards the end of the 1980s, her non-scientific approach to the non-human became the point of divergence between us. My early interest in animals and plants, for which she was largely responsible, began to be influenced by the disciplinary optics of natural history and its patriarchal ways. Around the age of 10, David Attenborough became my undisputed hero—I watched every single one of his wildlife documentaries with religious devotion. A couple of years later, my science teacher set Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals* as a summer reading—I was set. Jars, meshes, boxes, tweezers... anything I could use to catch an animal or put an animal into, to look at, for a while, was fit for purpose. My grandmother did not approve—the question: "...and when are you going to release that?" would be inevitably directed at me with impeccable timing. I could no longer see the magic in her terrace. To my eyes, the adventurous wilderness had turned into a jumble of intricate and unguided vegetal growth. Mind you, not much had changed with it, but I had. I was more and more interested in taxonomy, collecting, archiving, drawing what I found, taking notes, and reading 'young naturalist' manuals.

My grandmother passed away in 2003, after a long battle with cancer. Much of her exuberant plant collection had already been dispersed when she moved from her old home by the creek to a modern apartment with a narrow and smaller south east facing balcony which, she lamented, was "always too sunny and baked the plants". Some of the original plants still exist today. They are in family members' homes and gardens. The plants that outlived her have become invaluable material markers of absence in a complex and lengthy process of mourning: an extension of our dead ones in the silence of the living.

## Contemporary Art Revolutions

In my courses at SAIC and in the lengthy introduction to *Why Look at Plants?* I recount a history of scientific representations of plants encompassing the intertwined histories of bestiaries, herbaria, dry specimen collecting, plant representation in the east and in the west, and the ways in which all of the above influence some of the most celebrated

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generally make them present-at-hand. Bryant, L., Srnicek, N. and Harman, G. (2011) *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, (Melbourne: re.press)



paintings of plants, like Monet's *Waterlilies*. There is no shadow of a doubt that over the history of art and scientific representation, plants have, like animals, been objectified for the purpose of classification and to comprehend the complexities of their biology. Yesterday I gave a tour of the Art Institute's collection, focussing on many examples of plant's objectification in art. Hand in hand with the objectification of science, is in fact the objectification of art – the symbolic meanings attached to the beautiful flowers we see in Dutch still life paintings transform plants into vessels – beautiful metaphors, metonymical vehicles of faith and devotion designed to remind us that all eventually perishes and that we should make the most of our time. In these paintings plants are simultaneously wholly visible and yet, paradoxically, wholly absent. It is this persistent difficulty in addressing a different register of plant-being that brought artists to literally bring plants into the gallery space. From Edward Steichen's 1936 exhibition of gigantic delphiniums at MoMA to more recent postmodernist provocations, plants have increasingly populated the gallery space.

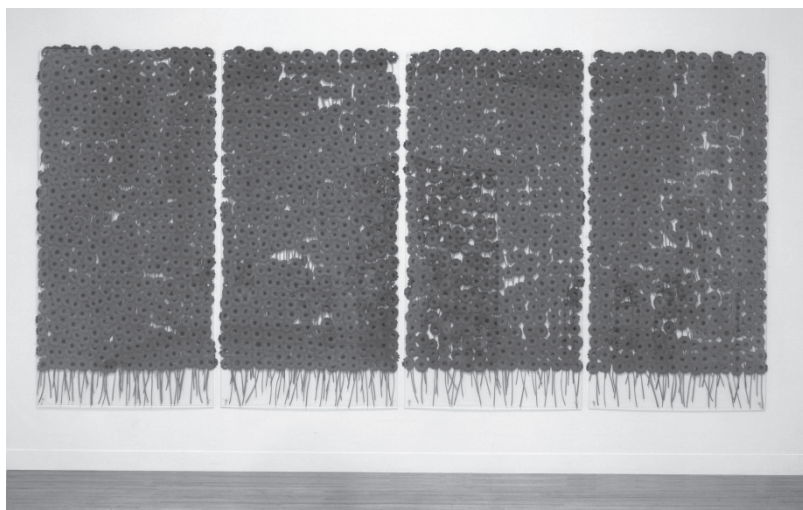
However, envisioning and devising de-objectifying relationship with plants in art is not an easy thing to accomplish, especially when many contemporary artists seem to be very concerned, and quite rightly so, with the fact that our relationship with plants has not only been shaped by symbolism, but most importantly, and more recently, by capitalism. So, this is the specific challenge that the second part of this talk focuses on – the opposite of what the previous section, titled *Amarcord*, attempted to map. What alternatives are at our disposal and how can art help us to conceive new notions of plant-being?

But before we begin, it is worth remembering that plants in the gallery space essentially exist as unstable beings – despite their apparent stillness they challenge the institutional worship for order, purity, and fixity. They, more often than not, operate as silent and dissident roles that actively redefine the power relations inscribed in the gallery space, bending its modernist soul well past the axis of anthropocentrism.

I would like to begin by considering two works involving plants. One employs the materiality of plants in a destabilizing way but yet relies on traditional notions of classicism. The other employs plants in a thoroughly original dimension of “being-with”. These are not necessarily markers of polarities but they give us an idea of how artist's relationships to plants are changing.

Anya Gallaccio's *Preserve Beauty* involves 2000 red gerberas presented in a single layer placed under sheets of glass secured to the gallery walls. The inevitable wilting of the flowers reverses century of history in which still life painting successfully, albeit only representationally,

preserved beauty. The flowers are thus allowed to slowly rot through the course of the installation, which can last up to three months, posing questions about what beauty is, where it is situated in Western values? How have we come to associate the artificiality of stasis with beauty and ugliness with the tremendous mutations caused by decay? Surely the patterns left on the glass surface by the rotting flowers can be aesthetically beautiful, since they recall the patterns and brushstrokes of abstract expressionist painting. Yet, preserve beauty is pervaded by an obvious anxiety: a *memento mori* that embraces the messiness of death itself. And this is one of the prominent challenges this work poses to the gallery space. The brown juices that drip to the floor uncannily look like blood. The smell of decay pervades the air. Questioning the boundary between nature and culture, *Preserve Beauty* casts a shadow on the other works around it and their implicit attempt to comfort us with the notions of eternal beauty or absolute truth. Yet, despite its material abrasiveness, its meaning is anchored in classical lyricism – a dimension that most readily relegates “plant-being” to objectification. The challenges plants pose to the institutional authority of the gallery space more regularly seem to have



[Fig. 1.1]

**Anya Gallaccio**

*Preserve Beauty*, 1991-2003. 2000 red gerberas, glass, metal, rubber displayed: 2600 x 5350 x 25 mm. Presented by an anonymous donor 2004

© Anya Gallaccio, courtesy Lehmann Maupin Gallery, New York

their roots firmly planted in past cultural dimensions that still very much inform our relationships with plants today.

In Marc Quinn's 2000 installation titled *Garden* over one thousand plants, at the peak of their aesthetic glory, were immersed in 25 tons of low-viscosity silicone maintained at -20C.<sup>4</sup> A 12.70 x 5.43 x 3.20 meters cold room housing a tank preserving an enchanted garden—the tank maintained the temperature of the silicone and that of the surrounding gallery space constant. The spectacle was sublime, or as many would report: otherworldly. *Garden*, as the title suggests, essentially was a utopia: the artistic incarnation of man's desire to control nature, to select, and organize what we find beautiful, to make a certain beauty visible, and most importantly, to prevent it from ever fading. But in its dioramic stasis, Quinn's installation did more than displaying natural beauty—the opposite is, in fact, true: In Quinn's garden, the artificiality of what we call nature is revealed in its constructed essence. The piece inscribed multiple and contradicting narratives of human and nature co-evolutions through the geocultural delimitation of the garden: a space heavily ridden with symbolism, defined by specific power/knowledge relationships, and driven by often implicit and problematic aesthetic desires for purity and perfection.

Quinn said that, “there is something sinister about a beauty that does not decay. Like *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, it implies decay somewhere else”.<sup>5</sup> In fact, *Garden* relied on a conspicuous technological info-structure in which generators and refrigerating units maintained the required temperature and the lighting provided by tube lamps especially designed to withstand temperatures of -50C enable visibility. A power-failure would have meant the disastrous demise of this heavenly vision. From this perspective, *Garden* becomes a post-apocalyptic edenic space – the only alternative to the impossibility of life outside enclosures.

Furthermore, ‘Nature-culture coevolutions’ can be traced in the flowers composing Quinn's garden, since they all are *cultivars*: varieties selectively bred over time in order to accentuate desirable characteristics. These flowers are the result of centuries (sometimes millennia) of processes designed to tailor plants according to our own desires: how big a flower should be, how deep its coloration, how intense its fragrance. Simultaneously, by biologically allowing certain changes to happen, and forbidding others, plants have shaped our aesthetic taste and our economies, along with our senses. Any garden actually is the result of

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<sup>4</sup> Prada, M., Celant, G., Leader, D., Quinn, M. (2000) *Marc Quinn*, (Milano: Fondazione Prada) p.286

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, p.213



[Fig. 1.2]

**Marc Quinn**

*Garden*, Cold room, stainless steel, heated glass, refrigerating equipment, mirrors, turf, real plants, acrylic tank, low viscosity silicone oil held at  $-20^{\circ}\text{C}$ , photo: Attilio Maranzano © Courtesy Marc Quinn Studio and Fondazione Prada

multiple capitalist transactions, from the land to the tools, from the shingles and pebbles to fertilizers and pesticides, and the plants purchased from the gardening center—nothing in the garden is ever pure, or natural, as we like to say. Quinn's *Garden* is an amalgamation of symbols—more precisely, its mix of exotic and indigenous species constitutes a commentary on the historical forces of financial power over the lives of man and plants alike. This wealth marked by the outstandingly exuberant forms and coloration of exotic species, metonymically maps appropriative economies grounded in the past histories of colonialism. A few centuries ago, many of these plants were transported to Europe as tokens of dominion over different and distant cultures that were regularly misrepresented, misunderstood, and objectified. This connotation raises questions of cultural and biological origins of difference, since notions of otherness were constructed through the painting of exotic animals and plants as markers of what was then called a primitive essence.

Srijon Chowdhury's 2015 installation by the title *Affected Painting* provides a cunning example of intricate nature-culture entanglements defined by the capitalist economies of mass-production in

this very context. Set up as a freestanding composite of multiple vertical canvases, *Affected Painting* hides an inconvenient truth on one side and distracts via a sublime illusion on the other. One side of the installation bears demarcated painterly qualities, while the other is a sculptural assemblage. For the latter, Chowdhury has gathered a number cheap mass-produced objects which juxtaposed construct a postmodernist landscape of ruination. On this side, everything is laid bare—here there is no mystery and no classical mythology: a plastic milk crate, some concrete blocks, product packaging, posts of paint, and an inordinate amount of electric cabling hooked to power strips alighting studio spotlights filtered by broad sheets of colored gelatin. Amongst these man-made objects are some potted plants—different varieties of common mass-produced plants like palm trees, a yucca, rosemary, and some dead plants too... But on the opposite side all instantly vanishes. On this side, mystery and mythology are all that exists. The silhouetted exotic plants produce intricate and elegant plays of visibility and invisibility through colored lighting, which evokes desires worthy of an orientalist dream—everything appears effortlessly harmonious, peaceful, and dreamlike. The sale of capitalist dreams in which nature is always constructed through the exploitation of animals and plants is the result of gritty and reckless operations able to conceal themselves behind a screen of fictitiously harmonized aesthetics: this is how the world we live in works and how it has worked for a long time.

Moving beyond the perceived passivity of plants and harnessing the agency of potted plants, SAIC alumnus Rashid Johnson, has incorporated potted plants in his installation/performance maze-like environments that integrate tropical plants such as palms, dracaenas, ficus, and ferns, with sculptural elements, moving image, sound, and everyday objects to immerse the viewer in the artist's poetic manifestation of a world where fictions and facts, histories and speculations converge. Together these seemingly incongruent building blocks give way to a game of free associations revealing different perspectives on cultural symbols and artifacts. Rashid's invitation is to prioritize intuition and affinity as valid modes of experience capable of surpassing social class boundaries, national and racial identity constructs. In this context, the plants are used in two specific ways, they destabilize the power-system of the institutional presence of the gallery space whilst introducing an element of responsibility. As the artist explained, plants are a call to be present, to keep something alive, and ultimately, to care.





[Fig. 1.3]

**Rashid Johnson**

*Within Our Gates*, mixed media, Garage Center for Contemporary Culture, 2016. Courtesy the Artist and Hauser and Wirth. Photo: Alexey Naroditsky © Rashid Johnson

But I also wanted to consider a couple of examples in which our perception of “plant-life” is being subverted by artists who work with technology. Céleste Boursier-Mougenot’s contribution to the 2015 edition of the Venice Biennale titled *All the World’s Futures*’ surprised viewers by presenting *révolutions* a kinetic installation involving three roaming trees. The work’s main preoccupation lied with human/plant relations, agency, and perception.<sup>6</sup> Boursier-Mougenot reversed the archetypal nature/culture stereotype grounded in the inside/outside dichotomy by taking Scotch pines into the gallery space. Scotch pines are native to Eurasia, and their cultural co-evolution with humans has been substantially defined by their aesthetic qualities, resistance, and versatility which makes them perfect Christmas trees. It is reported that the United States’ consumption ranges between 35 to 40 million. Stephen Nissenbaum’s 1996 book titled *The Battle for Christmas* argued that Christmas trees were introduced to the United States by progressive reformists who saw in the German tradition of the Christmas tree an opportunity to counterbalance the materialist and indulgent way in which Americans celebrated the festivity.<sup>7</sup> Through the introduction of rituals such as placing presents at its base on Christmas Eve, the tree was meant to organize and limit the exchange of commodities by providing a confined space and time for them. “The family tree became the locus of not only surprise and gratitude but also of *mutual* generosity, the hub of a material exchange “forged outside the fevered crucible of market relations.” However, in the long run, the introduction of the Christmas tree only provided a place marker and perfect embodiment for the ever-growing economy of decorations worth millions of dollars while providing capitalism with another means through which to market the passing of seasons. Intended of a redeemer of consumerism, the tree has today become the emblem of the quintessential human/plant capitalist relationship involving trees. The processes of production and consumption involved in its farming, harvesting, selling, and recycling make the tree into a perfect commodity—a fetishized, disposable object with an inscribed yearly purchase demand.

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<sup>6</sup> Boursier-Mougenot, C. (2015) *Revolutions* (Arles: Analogues)

<sup>7</sup> Nissenbaum, S. (2010) *The Battle of Christmas* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group)



[Fig. 1.4]

**Céleste Boursier-Mougenot***rêvolutions*, mixed media, 2015. Photo Jean-Pierre Dalbéra by CC BY 2.0

Boursier-Mougenot's installation reverses the utter passification of these trees by providing the Scotch pines with a wheeled base linked to a complex electronic system of sap flow sensors which through a low-voltage electrical current gives them the ability to move in space in order to choose their preferred situation in relation to lighting, temperature, and humidity in their environment. In so doing, the artist literally uproots the essential notion of stasis intrinsic to plant-being—making visible the agential abilities of the tree that we usually cannot appreciate due to our perceptive limitations. Plants connectedness to their place of birth has been perceived as an essential objectifying quality of their being. Reversing this determinism presents trees as imbued of agency gesturing towards the notions that are usually denied to plant-being: decision making, active involvement in processes of self-sustenance, and character. The three trees in the exhibiting space are the same size, and age—yet, they seem to prefer different places in the gallery—they at times meet each



other, but of course we do not know if this is deliberately sought after or accidental.

Ultimately Boursier-Mougenot's installation successfully makes sense of plant-life beyond the stereotypical restrictions of objectifying consumerist strategies—what if we could perceive the agency of trees more readily than we do? Would we still cut them, dress them up, and dispose of them every year? Part of the exhibiting space in the French pavilion has been set up as a seating area described by the artist as a meditative zone. There, viewers could think about our relationship with plants while their aural attentiveness was stimulated by an electric rustling emanated by the sensors enabling tree locomotion. The whole of Boursier-Mougenot's installation appears therefore as an effective posthumanist utopia in which cyborgian apparatuses enable different plant/human relational to arise.

*In The Eyes of The Animal* by creative studio Marshmallow Laser Feast proposes a contemporary, posthuman, non-objectifying aesthetic of forest-experiencing. As the title suggests the project involves a radical decentering of the classical anthropocentric perspective, which has historically structured the representation of nature. The artists explain that

[...] the spectator flies over the impressive landscape of Grizedale, being able to zoom in on the tiniest detail of microscopic insects and see in the eyes of different animals that live in the park. The aim is to understand how animals visually process the physical space and thus, leaving the human condition for a moment and even comparing the way we see to the way a bear sees, for instance.<sup>8</sup>

To achieve this, Marshmallow Laser Feast have designed a highly complex, virtual-reality headset combining Lidar scanning, CT scanning, and photogrammetry techniques, able to construct a rendering of the forest as perceived by a non-human.<sup>9</sup> With the aid of an immersive backpack-subwoofer transmitting base frequencies directly to the muscles and bones of the human body, the viewer can experience the forest beyond the constraints imposed by realistic, optical representation. With vision losing

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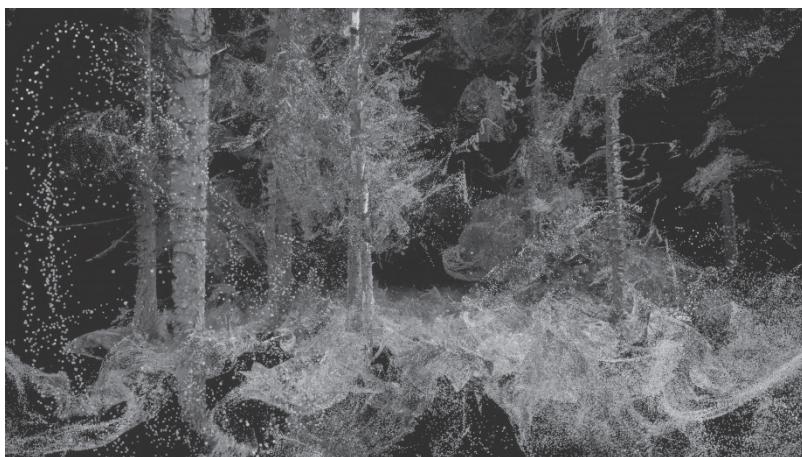
<sup>8</sup> Marshmallow Laser Feast, *In The Eyes of The Animal*, press release, 2015. Commissioned by *Abandon Normal Devices* and *Forestry Commission England's Forest Art Work*. Produced by *Abandon Normal Devices* and *Marshmallow Laser Feast*. Supported using public funding by Arts Council England and Forestry Commission England, online, <http://sonarplustd.com/activity/eyes-animals-marshmallow-laser-feast/>, accessed on 23<sup>rd</sup> of February 2016

<sup>9</sup> Detailed information about the technologies involved in the making of the hardware and software are available here.

its primacy as epistemological tool in the construction of nature, the forest is finally enabled to shed its inscribed cultural meanings—it can momentarily, at least, cease to be the site of human mythologies to appear as the intricate space defined by bio-intra-actions and bio-becomings that art, philosophy, psychoanalysis have regularly concealed. Furthermore, displacing the primacy of vision, *In The Eyes of The Animal*, brings into questions epistemic notions of human and animal scale. Micro and macro locations become subjective and shifting, relative values define instead a speculative approach that produces an experience of an ever-elusive overlaying of different forests coexisting at the same time. With the absence of human's centrality and the disappearance of a definitive notion of scale, also dissipates the work of classical beauty and the sublime. Here the historical antagonism towards nature is replaced by a new model of engaged-experience, one of being-with in opposition to the actual and metaphorical separateness essential to the sublime aesthetic.

Moreover, the posthumanist modes of perception enabled by *In The Eyes of The Animal* are portable and site specific. The electronic kit is portable, and it produces non-human perceptions of the environment in real time as the viewer explores the space. That the experience is enabled to take place outside the gallery space, in a forest itself, is of paramount importance to the material as well as to the symbolic register inscribed in the piece. Being in the forest and experiencing it through an interface that obliterates the sensorial cultural markers of being human proposes the opportunity of stepping out of the very human experience of the sublime. Doing without the gallery space, a powerful political gesture made famous during the 1960s by land art, also implies a disavowal of the classical histories of making and seeing art subjugated to capitalist laws and aesthetic conventions. As far as the opportunity to conceive nature through art in a true posthumanist way goes, Marshmallow Laser Feast have certainly mapped new and exciting territories.

The technological interfaces used in *In The Eyes of The Animal* do not replace the forest with a simulacrum, like in the case of traditional representations I have discussed here: they are technically reliant on the shared physical presence of the forest and the participant. This contingency constitutes one of the most important aspects of speculative aesthetics that are capable to upturn anthropocentric approaches to the non-human. The type of knowledge produced by the experience of one's body immerse in the forest is a deliberately open-ended one. *In The Eyes of The Animal's* emphasis on the 'animal-vision' might be considered by some as some sort of practical answer to Thomas Nagel's 1974 essay



[Fig. 1.5] and [Fig. 1.6]

**Marshmallow Laser Feast**

*In The Eyes of the Animal*, Installation, 2015 © Marshmallow Laser Feast

‘What is it like to be a bat?’<sup>10</sup> Some animal studies scholars might more definitely follow that path, yet, more interestingly in the context of this book, is the possibility this project proposes to conceive new forms of speculative aesthetics capable to free forests, and plants more in general, from the objectifying, reductive, and anthropocentric economies of cultural consumption that have led us to the current climatic crisis. The forest thus can unravel as something wholly new, outside of the prescribed linguistic sphere, unpredictable for reasons wholly different from those inscribed in mythological accounts—here man is animal amongst other animals, and most importantly, amongst plants.

## Q&A

**David Rothenberg:** I was intrigued by your repeated mention of capitalism and how we should be aware of the capitalist's dimension involved in plants and art—how that's not nature in a traditional sense; how they were produced by industrial processes, and so on. Once you said that, I started to look at the artworks in a whole different way. When I saw that Rashid Johnson's piece sitting in a museum built by the world's greatest capitalist, Roman Abramovich, I started to wonder if any place for beauty might be at all left. I am actually afraid that his much consideration of the capitalist framework makes me like the works less. I wonder how emphasizing the means of production might increase our aesthetic appreciation instead of detracting?

**Giovanni Aloï:** I perfectly understand and share your point, David. I have been considering the works of art I have discussed for quite sometimes and it was not easy to decide that the capitalist framework required to be made visible. I initially struggled with it in exactly the same manner as you are now. What are the implications of this acknowledgment? "How can I make sense or mediate the dimension that it's the ugly side of the reality of the world we live in?" However, I believe that contemporary art is now embracing a new ethical register in which the semantic value of the signifier is problematized by its origin. It is no longer a matter of symbolism and archetypes. Materialities have histories and origins that are connected to broader realities we can no longer ignore. It's what Timothy Morton's notion of Dark Ecology is all about—the impossibility to find shelter in a pure and self-contained notion of “nature” from which we are

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<sup>10</sup> Nagel, T. (1974) ‘What is it like to be a bat?’, in *The Philosophical Review*, Vol.83, n.4, pp.435-450

excluded and the ineluctability of acknowledging and understanding the interconnectedness between everything else.

**Jenny Kendler:** Thanks so much for your talk. Returning to *The Secret Life of Plants* we watched earlier, I was interested in how you ended with the Marshmallow Laser Feast piece. Can you talk a little more about the role that technology might play in facilitating our shift away from objectification?

**Aloi:** Sure. It can be a bit of a cliché, right? How is technology effectively operating as an interface between us and plants? Does it move us away? Or can it bring us closer? And what are these parameters dictated by anyway? In the case of Marshmallow Laser Feast, technology fills an imaginary a space between us and the non-human. It replaces a vision with another and it temporarily takes us out of our anthropocentric comfort zone. The vision it produces is highly speculative. There is a strong sense of playfulness in how technology is being used in this project and the “in the eyes of the animal” notion leverages on that. We are animals. The biggest accomplishment technology provides in this context is to be able to transport the experience outside the gallery space, which is probably an interestingly appropriate dimension for an encounter with a non-human. Another important accomplishment of the technological interface they use is that it shreds the cultural history of the forest as a place of hauntings, primordial fear, or other mythological and folkloric references. The forest is revealed as a different place that we might, temporarily explore outside our preconditioned and culturally encoded notions.

**Audience:** Do you think that the kind of 3D imaging piece by Marshmallow Laser Feast is in a way creating new mythologies?

**Aloi:** I guess it can, eventually, yes. This is all very new. The romantic sublime wasn't born overnight. It was the result of a sedimentation of centuries and centuries of narrativizations and cultural construction that eventually naturalized itself into our expectations of nature. I guess that, in time, technology can provide naturalised sublimes. What I liked about the Marshmallow Laser Feast approach is the radically different aesthetics. Some of them looked like an underwater scenario, others suggested the vision of a nocturnal animal. The fragmentations of vision being proposed by the different interfaces is already promising in terms of preventing one aesthetic to become the dominant one. Maybe diversity and fragmentation

are part of the strongest and more challenging alternatives technology has to offer?

**Audience:** Maybe the mythologies are the means at which we connect on a deeper level.

**Aloi:** Yes, mythologies of interconnectedness rather than mythologies of subjectivity. I understand.

# CHAPTER TWO

## MUSINGS ON VEGETALITY

### MICHAEL MARDER

We live in an age when critiques of essentialism and theoretical positions priding themselves on being nonessentialist are the norm. The typical formula of the somewhat quixotic battles against this philosophical strawman (or straw-woman) is, “There is no *X*” (fill in the blank: animal, human, world...), with the positive proviso: “There are only *Xs* (animals, humans, worlds...).” In other words, the norm nowadays is to espouse one’s sincere desire to do away with essence as the product of normalization meant to bring into line every singular deviation from the impossible ideal. In place of a unified, static, and oppressive essence, we get the radical empiricism of scattered, mobile, if not nomadic, multiplicities strategically and temporarily assembled around a common term that has an air of nominalism about it. But is this alternative an improvement on what it rejects? And do we know what we are rebuffing when we tout our presumably revolutionary non- or anti-essentialism?

On the surface of it, *essence* signifies *the being that is*,<sup>1</sup> it says its “yes” (this English word, too, growing from the same semantic root) to being. Nonessentialists, then, are for or on the side of nonbeing, to which they assent, mouthing their “yes,” as though despite themselves, despite their “no” to essence. In effect, they are left with nothing on their hands, albeit a nothing that is not pure negativity and that, infinitely mutating, is but a negative imprint of essential being. The solution to the conundrum of essence is thus more complicated than a forthright negation: it is necessary to unravel essence from within, to discover the “no” inside its “yes,” which might as well turn out to be the very essence of essence.

That is where vegetality enters the fray: although, on par with humanity and animality, it proposes to name the essence of plants, every path toward the “green” comprehension it opens winds up in a gray area of

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<sup>1</sup> *Essence* is derived from \*es-, the Proto-Indo-European root for “to be.”



essential nonessentiality. Let me direct the beams of the theoretical spotlight onto three such paths, namely the spatial, temporal, and behavioral interpretations of vegetality. Even if, in one way or another, I have discussed all three in my previous philosophical explorations of plants, they will get a new lease on life in the gray glow of what I have just termed “essential nonessentiality.”

*Space.* In its physiology, at the ontic level of its existence, a plant thrives by maximizing its exposure to the outside world. As I’ve noted in my *Plant-Thinking*, vegetal existence is essentially superficial,<sup>2</sup> subverting or perverting in *its* essence the very logic of essence as a deep, permanently hidden, and inert core of appearances. Buried in the fruit, the kernel that has been a staple figuration of concealed essence, as in Hegel’s philosophy, is only provisionally withdrawn from sight, waiting for the flesh that surrounds it to rot, so that it could be exposed to the elements and nourished by decay, the plant reborn from it. Burrowing into the earth, the root can nonetheless develop from other plant parts that appear in the open and is, therefore, not as indispensable (essential in the sense of necessity, of the vegetal *sine qua non*) as we think. So, when essence is grafted onto the skin of appearances, when it becomes sensible to the point of tangibility, when physical superficies endlessly overlay other superficies rather than a profoundly metaphysical ultimate reality, then essential nonessentiality flourishes in a mode of existence that branches out and leafs into the *is-yes* it addresses to the world.

*Time.* The temporal dimension of a self-subverting essence concerns history. Whereas, at the heights of metaphysics, historical fluctuations and upheavals held little significance because they left the ahistorical essence of the phenomenon unaffected, essential nonessentiality obeys the existential rule that the meaning of being is time. Time or, concretely speaking, existence itself elevated to the status of essence is the original alloy of becoming and being, which never attains any degree of purity. *The being that is* is a fleeting moment between the being that was and the being that will be. Each phase of a plant’s life sees it beholden to a vegetal heterotemporality, an expression I’ve coined to refer to the time of its other, be it seasonal alteration and alternation or the human agro-activity that tampers with such cycles, from the simple contraption of the hothouse to the introduction of the ripening gas C<sub>2</sub>H<sub>4</sub> (Ethylene), now the most widely manufactured organic compound in the world. Temporally, plants are insofar as, without uttering anything, they say *yes* to the other

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Michael Marder, *Plant-Thinking: A Philosophy of Vegetal Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), pp. 80ff.



through everything they do in an affirmation that precisely takes time to become effective. And the same holds for the concept of *the plant* as for the heterotemporal constitution of plants: there is indeed no ideal construct, from which the actual historical versions of planthood would deviate; however, this does not mean that we should give up on vegetality, understood as the sum total of deviations lacking a norm or as an infinite number of detours toward the other. Whatever we are collectively inflicting on plants at the current (and at any other) intersection of human and vegetal histories meddles directly with their essence. The commercial production of sterile seeds, for instance, not only robs plants of their reproductive potential but also consolidates vegetality as something sterile, radically finite (nonreproducible) in itself yet marshalled toward infinite growth, corresponding to the infinite (nonsatisfiable) demands of capital, to which vegetality is forced monotonously to say its *yes*.

*Activity.* Growing is the activity of plants that seems to retrieve the old model of essence. While we can subtract virtually every one of their features, taking growth away would do away with plants. It is the aspect of their existence that is irreducible, absolute, essential, and fundamental to what they are. Upon a closer look, we spot various fissures in the recovered façade of vegetal essence. Growth fills in the metaphysical gap between being and doing: what a plant does passes seamlessly into what it is and vice versa. Vegetation vegetates; plant behavior derives from the morphological changes, initiated by biochemical cues, hormonal stimuli, genetic or epigenetic expressions in response to environmental conditions, predation, or proximity of other plants. To our ear, the verb “to vegetate” sounds hopelessly passive, yet it is thanks to this association that the second crack in the behavioral façade of vegetality comes to light: besides erasing the difference between being and doing, the essential nonessentiality of growth invalidates the distinction between activity and passivity. Although the Latin *vegēre* means “to excite” and connotes vigor, virility, and strength, vegetating has acquired the opposite sense of dullness and idleness, later on, re-projected onto plants and coloring their image that predominates in the popular imagination. Probably because vegetal doing is often so subtle, so firmly anchored in metamorphosis that requires a relatively long time to be accomplished, it is mistaken for nondoing, for inactivity. As a result, X and not-X mingle in vegetality, jointly constituting plant essence. Something of this formal logical contradiction reverberates in the claim to and of growth, a signature activity of plants that, at the same time, characterizes the whole of what we know as nature. That is another fissure, the third for those who are counting: the most essential property of plants is also what is most

common to all living beings; the growth proper to them is entirely improper; that which is theirs is at the same time, not theirs. *non solum vegēt et vegerent sed verum vegēo, vegēs, vegēmus*—not only does it vegetate (or excite) and not only do they vegetate, but also I vegetate, you vegetate, we vegetate (or excite).

The spatial, temporal, and behavioral “glitches” in vegetality—the glitches that, far from accidental, are built into its “program”—amount to the internal displacement of plant essence, which is the paradigm case of the internal displacement of essence *proper*, of the essence of essence. It feels rather hollow to assert, in formal philosophical terms and together with the Hegel of *Philosophy of Nature*, that vegetal identity is its nonidentity and that a fair bit of necessary confusion between the same and the other permeates plant world. More vividly than that, we can consider how the vegetal *is* is a *yes* to the other so vehement as to hand plant essence over to the other—to another essence or to the other of essence, a nonessence. In divesting itself of “autonomous” being that would stand over and against other kinds of being on the one hand and nonbeing on the other, in de-essentializing itself, vegetality is all the more faithful to the essence of essence, in that it gathers together as petals in a bud the different sense of the \*es-. It is this ontological generosity that allows it nonviolently to sup-plant being “as such” (i.e., essential being).

I have devoted many pages of my theoretical writings to the plant/nature synecdoche, a vegetal part representing the whole it participates in. The activity of vegetality inverts this relation, prompting the question: What if the plant were not *in the first instance* a synecdoche of nature? What if it were nature “itself,” before its formalization into an abstract totality of organic and inorganic beings, or the “sum total of appearances” as Kant puts it? Could it be the case that all natural entities were initially understood as vegetal—above all growing, as well as decaying and capable of self-reproduction? In addition to plants, animals, and humans (with the later addition of fungi and microorganisms), the vegetality of nature would then encompass the rising-growing and the setting-decaying sun, waxing and waning lunar phases, volcanic formations and the swell of mountains commemorating them, the metal ores thought of as plant-like in alchemy, and so forth. Still, it will be pointed out, a big difference exists between claiming that all of nature is vegetal and arguing that the essence of essence, or being “as such,” is vegetality. How to bridge these levels of analysis, if that’s what they are?

Martin Heidegger offers a clue with his suggestion that, in ancient Greece, nature (*phusis*) as a burgeoning, blossoming, overall movement of growth was the name, or the misnomer, for being. “What

does the word *phusis* say?" Heidegger asks. His response: "It says what emerges from itself (for example, the emergence, the blossoming, of a rose), the unfolding that opens itself up, the coming-into-appearance in such unfolding, and holding itself and persisting in appearance—in short, the emerging-abiding sway. [...] This emerging and standing-out-in-itself-from-itself may not be taken as just one process among others that we observe in beings. *Phusis* is Being itself, by virtue of which beings first become and remain observable."<sup>3</sup> There is no "emerging-abiding sway" of *phusis* without vegetality, without a journey through every stage of plant germination, growth, blossoming, and finite self-preservation through reproduction. The nature of nature, the essence of essence, is a *yes-sence*, saluting and affirming vegetal being, which is, for its part, the saluting affirmation of the other. It is the spatiotemporal ecstasy of a seed that, uncontainable in itself, spills out or dehisces and germinates, impatient to be, to exist; of a leaf that unfolds and presents itself to light and to sight (touch, smell, and taste); of a flower that leaves the bud behind and blossoms forth welcoming bees and butterflies and its own wilting and decay. The standing-out-in-itself-from-itself essential to the active stillness of *phusis* reiterates plant growth and presages existence, a one-word condensation of this standing-out.

Emerging, forming, growing right before our eyes is the defundamental ontology of vegetality, the anarchic principle of plant being that deletes itself from every representation, from every world-picture so as to give room to being as such, with neither a beginning nor a clearly established hierarchical order nor a single guiding directive. None of this, however, goes to the vegetal, semantic, or conceptual root of essence, where the articulation of the copula, the *is*, resides.

A tautology: essence is. Or, is it (a tautology)? The *is* leads whatever precedes it (conventionally, the grammatical subject) outside and beyond itself, mediating between it and the predicate. Even in the case of a predicate identical to the subject, even in the case of nothing following it, as in the statement "essence is," where the *is* implicitly articulates essence with being, in and as which it is. Led outside and beyond itself, the subject replicates the activity of nature that stands out in itself from itself. The copula is a conductor to the beyond, the initiator of a relation. It shares this role with plants that articulate the classical elements of water, the earth, solar fire, and air, previously indifferent toward (and, hence, unrelated to) one another. And, like the plant that stands in for the whole of nature, the

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<sup>3</sup> Heidegger, M. (2000) *Introduction to Metaphysics*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press), p. 15.

copula is a grammatical form of the verb “to be,” conjugated in the present tense third person singular, that betokens verbal being as such. Discursively, plant being is being; vegetality is the *is*: finite in space, time, type of activity, and designation, it is infinitely malleable and immanently self-transcendent in its “emerging-abiding sway.”

It follows that the fullness of essence or of being is not the all-embracing totality Emmanuel Levinas has made it out to be, but the overflow of a singularity that unfolds toward the other and, in this unfolding, subtracts itself from the relations it makes possible, leaving in its wake the roominess wherein the articulated terms can subsist. The copula—this link forged from a specific variation on the verb “to be”—and the plant—this particular living being—do not conquer and dominate the rest of the grammatical and biological forms they welcome by saying their “yes,” by serving as passageways between diverse elements: subject and predicate, earth and sky. They are, rather, the figures of the essence beyond essence, a “beyond” that is perhaps what is most essential to essence.

Now, essence beyond essence, or “essential nonessentiality,” is existence, the standing outside itself in itself of being. Instead of a static edifice, being is non-self-coincidence: growing, becoming, vegetal. In medieval thought, only in God as *ens perfectissimum* (the most perfect being) were essence and existence one and the same. The coincidence of the two presupposed, in turn, a prior separation between the stable and the unstable, atemporal and temporal being, overcome nowhere else but in the exceptionality of divine essence-existence. Vegetality demonstrates this coalescence in a manner different from that of divinity: it shows that essence is already existence, its “in-itself” primordially twisted into “outside-itself” and, therefore, into “for-the-other.” It reveals the existentiality of essence, translated not only into a *yes-sence* but also into an *ex-sence*, the outwardness, exteriority, extending or tending toward the other. And, because vegetality is both proper to plants and shared with other kinds of beings, it extends this growing extension beyond itself all the way to essence and existence “as such.” Conversely, to segregate essence from other essences and from existence, to close it off by blocking its “beyond,” is to uproot the plant in it, which is what the metaphysical tradition in the West has been doing for centuries. In any event, essence will be de-essentialized. The question is: How? Will it be subject to external negation at the hands of antiessentialists? Will it negate itself in affirming its absolute independence? Or, will it come to its end (not to be conflated with termination) in the acceptance of its existential bent, in and

through vegetality that brings essence to itself by putting it face-to-face with the other?

## Q&A

**Giovanni Aloï:** I was thinking about the “essence of essence” in relation to different species of plant and I was wondering about your relationship with plants, where your thinking stems from. Part of your work revolves around notions of philosophical plants, literary plants, plants in art. I'd like to shift the conversation towards the direction of biological plants if we can call them so, the living organisms.

**Michael Marder:** Yes, sure. Thank you for this question. Well, maybe I will just recap very briefly the trajectory of my thinking with an eye to bringing it back to this question of essence. It all started with my first book on the subject, *Plant-Thinking*, which was an attempt to deconstruct the history of Western philosophy by showing that all of these stable categories of being, the subject, and so on are troubled and disturbed by plants that are constantly mutating, always changing. But also the other concern, beyond this more critical move, was to suggest more positively an existential ontology of plants as beings with their own kind of world, their own kind of time, and so on, that would not be reducible to a lesser version of the animal or the human, and that would grant them a certain mode of existence understood existentially with their own possibilities, their own world, their own time.

From there, I moved to *The Philosopher's Plant: An Intellectual Herbarium* which was another artistic collaboration with French artist Mathilde Roussel. What we did was we went through the history of Western and not only Western philosophy, from ancient philosophy to our days, and constructed an intellectual herbarium. It paired each philosopher with a plant that he or she talks about in their work and explained the system of thought of that thinker based on the plant, often using relevant biographical bits from the lives of those thinkers. Mathilde created a very beautiful hybrid plant-human images that gave the visual aspect to this intellectual herbarium.

Already in these two books, I moved from a purely theoretical exploration to the biographies of philosophers. And then I experimented with a genre that was a strange mix of autobiographical reflection, still collaborative, to be found in the book that you've mentioned, one that I co-authored with French philosopher Luce Irigaray. *Through Vegetal Being* is in part, an exchange of letters and meditations on the role of

plants in human life in general, and in our personal existences, as well as, in part, an autobiography. It seems that this trajectory has been going from the general understanding of plant being to the more individual, more concrete personal relationship with plants.

What I'm saying here is that, vegetality, the essence of plants, encompasses both moments. We cannot think of vegetality or plant essence in the abstract, as this kind of being or class of being. Rather, when we think about vegetality, we immediately involve and implicate ourselves. We put ourselves, our own thinking, our own bodies, our own memories on the line. Autobiography can do intricate theoretical work, as you've beautifully demonstrated, Giovanni, in your own keynote, as well. That is not just a superfluous addition, but it is the essence of essence—this singularity itself—if we rethink essentiality through the vegetal.

**Aloi:** Makes perfect sense. Thank you.

**Jenny Kendler:** I was really interested in the comment that you made about *essence*, which I think is a compelling term in this context. You're presenting the vegetal being in a kind of persistent movement towards the other—representing an ontological generosity. So, how do you think about our mammality in opposition to this vegetality? In human cultures, when you're given a gift, generosity is required in return—and actually we see this altruism throughout the kingdom of mammals. I was wondering what is our response, then, to this kind of persistent, open, radical, generosity of the plant? Are we then required by our own mammality to be generous, or to be caretakers, in return?

**Marder:** That's an excellent question. We know what the historical response has been, which is exploitation, right? If you have a being that in its very existence says, *yes* to the world, that follows a hetero-temporality, we interpret it to mean that we can simply be the manipulators. We can manipulate the time and existence of plants so that they would become more bountiful and produce better yields and crops and so on. We can all blame capitalism, but in fact, I see in agro-capitalism an exaggeration of a trend that was very much pre-capitalist in a sense, right? That is just the kind of an extreme version of what has been going on ever since, I would say, the beginning of the first experiments in agriculture, in human civilizations.

Vegetality is a *yes*, then. If it always says *yes* to the other, then I will be the and I will its addressee and dictate its being and time. Now, this is what I see as an almost pedagogic project, if not directly emulating or

imitating plants then feeling this responsibility of responding without manipulation or of practicing yes-saying to the world. If we understand what it means to say *yes* to the other, then how would we say *yes* to that *yes*, instead of falling into the trap of a very easy exploitation that finds in its path nothing but a low level of resistance. The question is difficult exactly because our capacity to say *yes* is, I would say, more limited than that of a plant. Ontologically limited, that is, not by way of words, but in our very embodiments, the bodily style. We are not as generous. How would you push against that limit in order to acknowledge the ontological generosity of plants? This is the practical and theoretical problem that we should be faced with.

**Audience:** Jenny just asked the same question I was going to ask but in a different form. Thinking through all this, using terms of generosity and existence, and much of the terminology you use from your own perspective, do you think we have a responsibility towards something that approaches an ethic of dignity that applies to that we can use to perhaps think of what we think of dignity and apply it then to the perspective you've elucidated in your talk?

**Marder:** Okay, this is an easy way. Actually, your first question also goes back to Levinas. For Levinas, the fullness of essence, of being, is an all-embracing totality. He wants to move beyond that exactly through the ethics of radical alterity, the ethics of the other, in which he sees the exact opposite of the fullness of essence, ontological fullness. And that connects to your first question because—absolutely—I think that there has to be an ethical relation that arises from this, a contemplation of vegetal possibilities. Yet, it is not going to be an ethics of dignity, but exactly an ethics of alterity more or less on the model of Levinas himself, so that the ethics of alterity is exactly this acceptance of infinite responsibility or infinite responsiveness.

The more I do or say for the other, the more I am responsible, the more I feel the weight of that responsibility. So, it is not that, by acting ethically, I can exhaust the imperative, but rather I deepen it even further. Given our divergence from plants and the limits of our generosity, I think that's the only ethical response that would do some justice to what we receive from them.





## CHAPTER THREE

### THE LEGAL LIFE OF PLANTS

SARA BLACK, AMBER GINSBURG,  
CLAUDIA FLORES AND ASH WOLFE

*This panel addresses the radical proposition of "Mother Earth Rights" through the speculative consideration of the "rights of a tree". Focusing on the molecule of carbon and the larger carbon cycle as a way to problematize the individual rights of any specific individual (human or plant) the discussion considers the material through-line of substances that stretch these entities into deep time. Collaborative artists Amber Ginsburg and Sara Black together with artist Ash Wolfe will be in discussion with Claudia Flores, assistant clinical professor and director of the International Human Rights Clinic at the University of Chicago Law School.*

**Sara Black:** Today, artists Amber Ginsburg, Ash Wolfe, human rights lawyer and clinical law faculty Claudia Flores and I will be presenting the panel titled *The Legal Life of Plants*. Our question pertaining to the rights of a tree begins with a more general question regarding the human relationship to all other earthly cohabitants. My co-panelist Amber Ginsburg and I, in our collaborative art practice, have been producing work that begins with the observation that our relationship to nonhuman beings is necessarily and broadly, human-centered. We hope to generate instances where we may glimpse outside of this perspective. Our human-centeredness is not only embedded in our cultural frameworks but also in our biology. This presents itself in numerous ways: the Judeo-Christian tradition teaches us that human beings were created in the image of God and that all other beings were created for our utility, as a resource to us. It is true that according to these tenets we are meant to steward the land and its creatures, but the meaning of stewardship is broadly conceived. As another example, the environmental movement advocates for the persistence of life on earth in its greatest diversity - it advocates for

sustainability - but most often the aim is to preserve "nature" as a resource to humans. That is, as opposed to plants and animals having valid rights to live for their own sake.

As a result of our biology, our thinking apparatus, our form, we necessarily relate to all things through human scales of reference. We are human-centered because in one simple sense we are centered in the human. The length of the human lifespan is knowable to us. We witness and recognize the human, or near human, lifespan in other beings as well. The *life* of the biological being of a tree presents itself more fully than the persistent existence of a substance like carbon that goes on through geologic time. It persists. Nonhuman time scales are outside of our frames of reference, so we don't see them. Instead, we see finite forms.

Amber and I have made a series of artworks over the past few years that attempt to break or open up this human frame of reference in order for us to recognize these less visible frames. One way to do this is to trace a material through-line across finite forms. In this case, we'll talk about the material persistence of carbon. If we were to look out the window at a tree, we would name it, "tree." We might imagine that it could transform into another state, at which point we would give it another name, maybe "lumber." Perhaps then the material of lumber would transform into something like, "table." Each one of these positions is quite static in our minds; not inaccurate, but also not a complete picture. Within our practice, we focus on these temporary states and quicken the process of transformation, so we can actually witness the changes. In many cases, the transformation will reveal the material through-line of substances like carbon, present, but hidden, within each temporary state.

All carbon-based life forms can be reduced to pure carbon through a process of charcoalization. When something is charcoalized, what remains is pure carbon. Though this carbon is ripe with the potential for release into the atmosphere, in this form it can remain sequestered for up to 2000 years and beyond. We have found this to be an interesting tool to reveal the interconnectedness that all things have on a molecular level: carbon is within them and carbon persists. Rather than perceiving individual forms, we are cued to recognize something much larger. Carbon is finite on the planet earth and it doesn't go away, it simply changes position.

You could be thinking about your own body as a form of temporary carbon sequestration, lasting the duration of a human lifespan. After you die, the position or location of that carbon changes. If you were burned it would go into the atmosphere, if you were buried it would go into the earth. Carbon is a neutral material that goes on. In this way, it has

the capacity to cut across the conceptual divisions we create when we identify things and name them. We've utilized the tree as an object of consideration in our work. We ask then, for this panel, "What are the rights of the tree as an individual?" If we look more deeply at the substance of this being and we recognize its most basic form as carbon, could that be an argument for its right to persist? Does an individual functioning within a complex system like the carbon cycle have the right to persist in that system simply because it is part of something larger than itself and is needed for the balancing of that larger system?

**Claudia Flores:** As Sarah mentioned I teach and practice human rights law. I think the most useful thing that I can do here is perhaps to just talk about how the law conceives of the environment and nature. How are advocates for the environment pushing the law towards conceiving of nature as rights-bearing? What are some of the questions and challenges this idea presents from a legal and social perspective? And then, I would like to begin to explore some of the concepts that Amber and Sara's work raises and how those concepts can be actualized when we're thinking about regulating relationships between humans and nature.

The first point to make is that the way the law conceives of nature is arguably in purely anthropomorphic terms. Nature is a resource that we either use wisely or unwisely. If you're an environmentalist focused on protecting nature, you want humans to use this resource wisely. In order to use that resource wisely, humans must consider what conditions are conducive to nature's ability to persist, flourish, grow and change in all of the ways nature must. If you are indifferent as to whether or not we use our resources wisely, then you just want us to use what nature has to offer in the most economically beneficial way.

Now some have questioned this approach, in the sense that as long as we think of nature as an object, the question is always "are we going to waste this resource or are we going to use it well?" The questions we might ask are never oriented towards thinking of nature as an agent. They are never oriented towards thinking about the wellbeing of nature in itself. We merely focus on nature as it relates to human existence and human benefit. If humans, for example, have no need for a particular species, unless we can demonstrate the way that species relates to other parts of natural existence that are important to us and related to us, then why should we care? If we think there is enough clean water in a particular area to serve us, then why are we going to preserve sources of clean water that are in surplus? This way of thinking about nature leads to a particular kind of relationship with the environment.

To address this potentially problematic way of thinking about the environment, some have tried to invoke the concept of *rights*. The idea is that we attribute rights to a number of subjects and these subjects could include nature. Humans have rights. Corporations have rights, such as religious freedom, through a legal fiction that treats a corporation as a legal entity representative of a group of individuals. Children have rights even though, like corporations to some extent, they cannot assert rights on behalf of themselves. Instead, children and corporations must do so through representatives who assert rights for them. Representatives of a corporation assert what the corporation wants or needs, decide what is best for the corporation and then advocate for that within the law. Recently, the U.S. Supreme Court held that a corporation had the right to religious freedom and to not cover contraceptives for its employees in service of that right. The rights of children are also asserted through a legal representative. Because we don't consider children to be self-determinative in a sense or to always know what is in their best interest, we allow representatives to assert their rights on their behalf in the law.

So, the idea is that a river could also have rights. In fact, many of you may have seen an article in the *New York Times* recently about a lawsuit in Colorado in which rights are being asserting on behalf of the Colorado River. The argument is that the river, in and of itself, is an entity with needs and that this entity should be able to flourish and grow and do all of the things that rivers do.

How does this play out practically? Well, our law is adversarial and the relationship between rights bearers is inherently confrontational. When entity 1 may assert rights against entity 2, the law needs to determine how to balance the interests of those two entities. All of this is really a human exercise. When the entities lack agency, we are in dialogue with ourselves, as we are the ones with power and agency. Thus, the practical question is whether the rights of a river could ever really be properly asserted and where such a right may impinge on human goals and desires. Could law ever properly take into consideration the rights of nature when it's infringing upon, inconveniencing, or limiting a human right in a substantial way?

This is one of the major issues scholars and activists have identified with legal frameworks for protecting nature and our environment - they leave human interest on one side and nature on the other, subject to human advocacy. And this framework, the one that recognizes nature as rights-bearing is already a very progressive way of thinking and is certainly not entrenched in the law. There are some municipalities that recognize the rights of nature, some constitutions that

do so and as well as national legislation that I will show you. The courts in Argentina and New Zealand have also held that nature has rights. Some judicial systems are starting to think about what the rights of nature might look like.

But beyond this, there's another way to conceive of the legal relationship between humans and nature that the law hasn't quite captured. It is a legal conception of interconnectedness of a system, one that doesn't rely on units or individual entities. Nature is not on one side and humans on the other, but both are part of a larger system that's in a relationship with each other. If one part of the system is off balance, then the other part of the system falls off balance. What I just said is very difficult for the law to capture but I'm going to share with you some attempts in which the law capture this idea. What I will say is that—even attempts in law to capture this, from my perspective, always end up as a reduction of rights with competing individual mechanisms. We just can't seem to step out of the framework of individuals at odds or entities competing for primacy. I don't know have a vision or solution for this but we're talking about it, thinking about it and there is potential. We may yet be able to see our ecosystem and our place in it as interdependent with the various components in relationships and focused less on individual units.

Let me just give you a few examples of how to think about this. This is the constitution of Ecuador and the rights-based language within it.

### Constitution of Ecuador

- Art. 71. Nature or Pachamama, where life is reproduced and exists, has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles, structure, functions and its processes in evolution...
- Art. 72. Nature has the right to restoration. This integral restoration is independent of the obligation on natural and juridical persons or the State to indemnify the people and the collectives that depend on the natural systems...
- Art. 73. The State will apply precaution and restriction measures in all the activities that can lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of the ecosystems or the permanent alteration of the natural cycles...
- Art. 74. The persons, people, communities, and nationalities will have the right to benefit from the environment and form natural wealth that will allow wellbeing...

The Ecuadorian Constitution describes nature as having rights. The right to exist is a right comparable to a human's right to life. The right

to persist is an ongoing right to survive. The right to maintain and regenerate is a forward thinking right to thrive, to betterment, increase and improvement of its “vital cycles, its structure, its functions and its processes in evolution.” This language is moving and beautiful but, as you can imagine, enforcement is undoubtedly complicated.

The second article, Article 72, states that “nature has the right to restoration.” That, presumably, addresses the harm we’ve already done to the planet and requires us to bring things back to a state that restores nature. The constitution explains restoration as being “independent of the obligation on natural and juridical persons or the State to indemnify” individuals and collectives. The thought here is that the right to restoration creates a positive obligation on the state (rather than the individuals who caused the harm) and that the state needs to reverse or restore conditions that will bring nature back to a state of thriving and persisting. The problem is obviously - what is the state to which it is required to bring nature back to? What exactly do we mean? Do we mean bringing nature back to where it was before humans ever walked the face of the earth? Or before we started destroying certain parts of the environment through exhaustion of resources? Are we talking about the many species that have become extinct over time? These are really difficult questions in law.

The second example is a Bolivian law. The definitions that follow in this section is an example of a legal definition that focuses on relationship and interconnectedness of nature and humans might look like.

### **The Framework Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well (Bolivian Law 300 2012)**

- Mother Earth is ...the dynamic living system formed by the indivisible community of all life systems and living beings who are interrelated, interdependent, and complementary, which share a common destiny.
- Life Systems is defined as ...complex and dynamic communities of plants, animals, micro-organisms and other beings in their environment, in which human communities and the rest of nature interact as a functional unit, under the influence of climatic, physiographic and geologic factors, as well as the productive practices and cultural diversity of Bolivians of both genders, and the worldviews of Indigenous nations and peoples, intercultural communities and the Afro-Bolivians.

Again, how you might actualize this is quite complicated but the language is compelling. “Mother earth is the dynamic living system formed by the indivisible community of all life’s systems and living beings who are interrelated, interdependent and complementary which share a common destiny.” That’s a legal definition of nature that recognizes that we, and all other living beings and life systems, are part of a larger system not in opposition to it. We are not more or less important than any other part of the larger system. Complex and dynamic communities of plants, animals, microorganisms, and other beings in the environment in which human communities and the rest of nature interact, are all one functional unit that survives, thrives and expands together. This places our needs and wants in context. This is the sort of vision one can imagine could provide an alternative to the confrontational, oppositional, current state of weighing rights against rights. If we can at least begin to conceive of a legal framework that recognizes or assumes we are engaged in the same goal as other parts of nature - the persistence of a thriving ecosystem, the legal conversation may be different.

**Ash Wolfe:** Plant life is generally taken to be both inert and insensate. New research has shown that plants are more “aware” than we have previously thought. Plants are able to make choices and show “kindness” to their species. My work deals with the two-sidedness of human interactions with plants. I’m interested in our daily interactions with plants: how plants are affected by human intervention and what the plants themselves can tell us about their perceptions and needs. This led to considerations of how wild vegetal life is affected by processes of eminent domain. Growing up in rural Minnesota, I saw first-hand how wildlife and farmland were being destroyed for government and private use. The spatial needs of economic development prevailed in every case over the spatial needs of plants. To counteract the removal of vegetal landscapes, we must become the space where wildlife thrives. For my project, “Plant Domain”, I have conceived a wearable in which plants can thrive as long as the wearer only moves and acts in order to respect and fulfil the needs of the living plants. The first wearable addresses the plant’s need for water.





[Fig. 3.1]

**Ash Wolfe**

*Plant Domain*, mixed media, 2017 © Ash Wolfe

The wearer collects water through a basin attached to the hood which then disperses the water through tubing to the plant-filled pockets. The need for carbon dioxide is expressed in the second wearable. Through the headpiece, the wearer exhales into a tube. Transmitting carbon dioxide directly to the plants, which eventually transform this to oxygen.

Each garment utilizes burlap to allow the native weeds to root into the work. This set of wearables is intended to problematize how we, humans, think about our interactions with plants. Vegetal landscapes are permitted to exist only if their existence has an economic function like tourism or agriculture. These wearables propose that human beings place themselves at the disposal of plants.

**Amber Ginsburg:** I'm going to expand on Claudia, Sara and Ash's wealth of insights by introducing and thinking through a project titled *Witness Tree*. *Witness Tree*, by Sara and me, was exhibited at Tiger Strikes Asteroid in Chicago. The project explores the notion of *witnessing* in two ways. The first is the ways in which our landscape is economically divided — a colonial form of thinking, the dividing of space for sale. As part of the westward expansion, the landscape was gridded, a process called plat mapping. This entailed marking the landscape with 100-ft. lengths of chains, laid out across America, marking square miles that continue to denote our major thoroughfares, our city blocks and our conception of lands as purchasable units. We have a particular spatial relationship to plat mapping here at the School of the Art Institute, as we stand at the 'zero-zero' grid point of the city, which happens to be situated in our Sullivan Galleries. This is to say that Chicago spreads out in mile increments, rigidly gridded from this point, each mile displayed in addresses (1000 for each East, North, West or South mile) stretching out from Sullivan Galleries. All this mapping required witness markers within the landscape and in the flat meandering river zone of the Midwest, there were very few stable things/objects that could function as permanent markers. Rivers move, grasses move, and most things/objects in the landscape move. Trees, particularly oak trees, became the witnesses by which ordinal direction was established.



[Fig. 3.2]

**Amber Ginsburg and Sara Black**

*Witness Tree*, mixed media, 2017, photo: Charles Roderick © Ginsburg/Black

This tree is set in the corner of the building, in the corner of the gallery, on the corner of a city block. We are instantiating the tree as both a marker of historical practices of space making and maker of longer deeper time. This tree was, in fact, a white oak. It is now turned into pure carbon. And the extracting of that carbon provides a different time scale to think about the very notion of witnessing from new perspectives. This tree, this carbon, is now going to be stable for the next 2000 years.

There is a possibility to speculate forward beyond the time frames that Sara has discussed. The human time frame that we usually construct around *treeness* and in particular in our relationship to personhood/familyhood is essential to human identity. We often think of our genealogical history in terms of a family tree. We plant trees to mark the birth and growth of loved ones. Or perhaps, I might plant a tree that I could eventually use as my coffin. All these conceptions are manifestations of how we implicitly see ourselves in the landscape and in time.

By turning this tree into pure carbon, we're stretching the time-framework of the tree into a carbon store for 2000 years. This gives us a view into deeper time, perhaps aligning the tree with geologic time. Carbon, in our larger ecosystem, is imagined as breath, respiring through air, water, and land. If you think about this time as a hold, this tree is holding its carbon breath in the larger cycle. Perhaps this notion of deep time can allow us, humans, to produce a space and time to think about a legal connectedness that mirrors the natural connectedness of carbon. This tree is holding its breath as a carbon print for this 2000 years, giving us a view to imagine that interconnectedness.

In thinking about this respiration and interconnectedness, Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, *Braiding Sweetgrass, Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* comes to mind. In the book, she provides a really helpful framework for re-thinking our relationship to what we call nature.

Since when is *Saturday* a verb? Everyone knows it's a noun. I grabbed the (Ojibwe) dictionary and flipped more pages and all kinds of things were verbs: "to be a hill, "to be red", "to be a long sandy stretch of beach, and then my finger rested on wiikweegamaa: "to be a bay". "Ridiculous", I ranted in my head.

"There is no reason to make this so complicated.

(Robin Wall Kimmerer, p.54)

And then I swear I heard a zap of synapses firing. An electric current sizzled down my arm and through my fingers and practically scorched the page where that one word lay. At that moment I could smell the water of the bay, watch it rock against the shore and hear it sift onto the sand. A bay



[Fig. 3.3]

**Amber Ginsburg and Sara Black***Witness Tree*, mixed media, 2017 (detail) photo: Charles Roderick © Ginsburg/Black

is a noun only if water is *dead*. When *the 'bay'* is a noun it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to *be* a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. (Robin Wall Kimmerer, p.55)

In this language-formation, all trees, including this white oak, are verbs, a mutating active form related to our own changing selves. They stretch their being into the world beyond the lifetime of a mere mortal oak. To witness verbs is different than to witness nouns, as the Bolivian Constitution suggests, it is to acknowledge process and reciprocity. In our current “noun driven” conception of nature, we have ways to conceive of care, inheritance, and stewardship. Our current relationship to nature primarily addresses ownership and use value. Inheritance is about the passing down of land through private ownership which, in its current legal state, does nothing to bring us closer to interconnectedness or the verb form of land. Stewardship might come closer, as it asserts a need to care. But to care for what? Stewardship is often thought of in terms of long-term maintenance of the things humans want or need from the land like farm-produce or animals to eat. Stewardship does not necessarily entail the rights, needs, or a verb-ness of our conception of land, water, trees.





[Fig. 3.4]

**Amber Ginsburg and Sara Black**

*Witness Tree*, mixed media, 2017 (detail) photo: Charles Roderick © Ginsburg/Black

**Sara Black:** I wanted to introduce the process of making charcoal. This is the first kiln that Amber and I made at the Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Lumsden, outside of Aberdeen. We used a stand-up barrel kiln to *charcoalize* our *Witness Tree* in Chicago. The process is fairly simple but has one very important element: it's anaerobic. The material of the tree never burns. The material that's in an inner chamber is heated up and all of the water, all of the hydrogen, and all of the other molecules that are present in the wood escape. As the temperature rises, the gases that are released begin to act as fuel—this is a kind of burning in on itself. The flame expires when there's nothing left to feed it and, in the end, the only thing that remains is carbon.

*Witness Tree* was a juvenile oak, about 18 ft. tall including the root ball. In order to fit it into the barrel kiln, we cut it into sections and cut all the branches no longer than 2 feet to then fit inside the anaerobic chamber. The intense heat inside the kiln leads to quite an amount of transformation. We found this quite interesting — this process seemed to work as a metaphor of the anthropomorphism we project onto trees and other beings. Thereafter, we meticulously pieced *Witness Tree* back together



[Fig. 3.5]

**Amber Ginsburg and Sara Black**

*Charcoal Kiln: Scottish Sculpture Workshop*, 2016, mixed media, photo: Charles Roderick © Ginsburg/Black

with grafting tape. You have likely heard about grafting. It is the process by which various fruit trees are brought together to create multiple varieties within one tree or to create a strong stock for a desired variety. At process by which various fruit trees are brought together to create multiple varieties within one tree or to create a strong stock for a desired variety. the end of each major segment we built a shelf, also out of oak, and at each juncture of a broken branch, we applied a wrapped bandage of grafting tape joining the pieces back together. Sitting upon the shelves and reaching upwards, it was whole again, a bit of a Frankenstein tree—it was precarious, so fragile, quite the opposite of the grafting techniques that create a hardy tree-breed. We envisioned this precarity as a metaphor to the limits in our thinking about trees.

**Claudia Flores:** In summary, law is just beginning to consider some of the dynamics displayed in these works. These competing concepts of objects and motion are what's really at stake when we think about how to protect nature and how to have a relationship with nature. In the excerpts I showed you from the Bolivian law, the Bolivian government attempts to describe and frame a set of relationships and actions.



As a complement to these relationships, Bolivian law also imbues “mother nature” with a set of rights. These represent an interesting compromise between this rights-based legal structure that I was describing to you and an attempt to really recognize that we are trying to describe something else that is in the relationship. So, these are the rights of nature:

- “The right to life. It is the right to the maintenance of the integrity of life systems and natural processes which sustain them as well as the capacity and condition for their renewal.”
- “The right to diversity of life is the right to the preservation of the differentiation and the variety of beings that comprise mother earth without being genetically altered nor modified in their structure in such a manner that threatens their existence, functioning, and future potential.”
- “The right to water is the right of the preservation of the quality and composition of water to sustain life systems and their protection with regards to contamination.”
- “The right to clean air. It is the right of the preservation of the quality and composition of the air to sustain life systems and their protection.”
- “The right to equilibrium. It is the right to maintenance restoration and interrelation, interdependence, ability to complement the functionality of mother Earth in a balanced manner for the continuation of its cycles and the renewal of its vital processes.”
- “The right to restoration is the right to the effective and opportune restoration of life systems affected by direct and indirect human activities.”
- “The right to equilibrium. It is the right to maintenance restoration and interrelation, interdependence, ability to complement the functionality of mother Earth in a balanced manner for the continuation of its cycles and the renewal of its vital processes.”
- “The right to restoration is the right to the effective and opportune restoration of life systems affected by direct and indirect human activities.”
- “The right to live free of contamination.” (Bolivian Law 300 2012).

Some of these rights reflect the ways that we think of human rights. And some reveal the limits to how we can understand relationships through law. Ultimately, we must still conceive of nature as an entity of some kind so that we can honor the way that this entity is actually composed of a series or matrix of events and relationships. This is new and unmapped

territory for the law. We will see how jurisprudence and legal frameworks develop around these understandings about law and nature. I personally do think there is an attempt to shift into a new paradigm and reflect an understanding that environmental law, in the way it is currently framed, will always struggle to advocate for nature because humans will always have the upper hand against the will of a passive resource.

## Q&A

**Giovanni Aloï:** Thank you very much. We're opening up to questions. But first, I have one right away for Ash. Some of your work made me think of Helio Oiticica and his "parangoles", the wearables made with different materials meant to be a freeing garment and simultaneously a burden for the wearer. The "parangoles" also entailed a conception of mobility and performativity. I was wondering if Oiticica is an influence on your wearables. But also, how perhaps the notion of imposition and freedom might play in that idea of wearable that you use?

**Wolfe:** I am not inspired by Helio Oiticica specifically. I went to the exhibition at the Art Institute last year, but it didn't influence my work. If anything, my wearables do the opposite of Oiticica's because whoever wears them forfeits their own freedom in order to care for the benefit of the plants.

**Audience:** Thank you for this beautiful presentation. I'll just start with one question for Claudia and correct me if I'm wrong, but you had mentioned that the list of rights is a compromise between what Bolivian people try to say and the translation into the legal system and into a Western, so-called universal legal language. So, I wonder if you could talk more about this compromise. Is anything being lost in this translation?

**Flores:** Yes, although I can't talk specifically about the Bolivian context, I do think that's right. Indigenous movements in Latin America and other parts of the world have often been in a different relationship to their environment. The language I showed you in the first two slides is an attempt to grasp at this relationship and move away from what they would consider "legal relationships with nature" that were imposed by Spanish colonialism. It is very difficult, and I say this with the utmost humility, to think about how that understanding of one's environment could be translated into legal frameworks today. It would require a great deal of reform and almost a legal revolution of sorts. Our entire concept of private

property would be in question. So, when you say compromise, that's exactly right. I think it's a compromise-in-motion, but I do think it is the case that the law moves slowly but it moves. As I said at the beginning, the concept of human rights is still fraught with contradictions, but I think there are kernels within the human rights system that can be quite helpful here.

Although the human rights system conceives of humans and focuses on the human relationship to the environment, there are many concepts that are and can be used to advocate for nature. The concept of socioeconomic rights, for example, is an attempt to set a basic standard for what every human can expect from life—the right to a basic education, a right to health, a right clean water. You can imagine this set of rights working their way into an understanding of what, at a basic level, needs to exist in our surrounding environment. You wouldn't be in a constant state of compromise but just acknowledge that there are certain basic standards for nature's maintenance, persistence and thriving. Such a conception would be less discretionary. This approach wouldn't get at the fundamental change in the relationship between humans and nature illustrated by the law in Bolivia, but it might provide a better legal framework to protect nature.

**Audience:** How can we be sure that we are advocating properly for the rights of anything until we hear from that thing itself? I mean I'm on your line of thinking, believe me, but we assume a lot in all of these cases and I've never talked to a tree, I've never talked to the wind, I've never talked to a river. I mean it's easier with mammals because perhaps we're closer to them; we presume everything based on the things that are harmful to us, or that hurt us or that make us cry or that make us sad or make us feel morally bereft or whatever. But we just don't know about other forms of life or environments.

**Black:** Yes, it's an interesting point and I think that it actually goes back to what Claudia was saying around the circumstance in which certain entities like children and corporations must have a representative to speak on their behalf. It is certainly true that a tree can't speak a human language. But it doesn't mean or doesn't deny the readable processes that we can interpret and understand and respond to and that more importantly are necessary for its survival. I think that what you're pointing at is this really difficult experience of moving outside of that anthropocentric framework in order to determine what it is that a non-human being is and how, or why, it deserves to persist in some way. I'm really interested in

the Ecuadorian perspective that being in this system together is *enough* as a defining principle for nature. That might be a way out of the trap. We're haunted by the question of individuality. It's why in this speculative conversation, Amber and I have chosen to focus around the rights of a tree as opposed to all of nature, because we're so accustomed to thinking about the rights of an individual. It feels like the first step for a broader translation. I think, without question, that we have to move outside of this paradigm. Using human rights as a model might be an access point, but we need to construct new models after that. I would like to pass this over to Claudia in case you have further remarks in regard to this particular differentiation between the Bolivian and Ecuadorian law.

**Flores:** Whenever we assert a certain right on behalf of an agent, there is a framework we draw upon and that framework enables us to assess what is going to be better for that agent. For example, when you are asserting certain rights on behalf of a child, you are relying on an understanding of what's best for children, such as a caring home, food, shelter, etc. This is a network of assumptions about what people want, assumptions about what would be better for them. However, assuming that, in some case, people don't know what's better for them, can become complicated, insensitive, and even exploitative. In the context of nature, I think and, perhaps this is highly simplistic, you do run into problems when you take it too far. If a tree's goal is to thrive, how do we properly facilitate that goal and what are the limits of that goal? In other words, what does it mean for nature to flourish? Even if we think of nature as an interdependent system, there will always be parts of that system doing better than others.

**Ginsburg:** I want to extend thinking about language and what it would mean to apply *verbness* to many non-human entities that we now attribute to *nounness*. The only entities in Potawatomi and Ojibwe that are verbs are objects that are made by humans. Once the tree becomes a table, it's a noun. It has stopped participating in an interconnected relationship with larger systems in nature. And so yes, maybe, another way of thinking about it is that, even though we don't know, and we can't speak directly to the tree, maybe we can create frameworks that include "Tree" as an active agent of the living in a sense that our interdependence is related through the active processes we share like respiration and dependence on water. The flow of these things as verbs could frame our interconnectedness. You cannot consider absolute interdependence with a noun; a noun is an object in its own right. A noun can't speak for itself and always needs another

absolute agent to speak for it. Perhaps *verbness* opens an access point in the conversation across agents.

**Audience:** I'm going to turn my question into a comment that might be interesting for a future conversation. In New Zealand, the Bolivian and Ecuadorian laws epistemological questions have been used as a model to legislate personhood for a national park and a river in 2013. I was having a conversation recently with the Maori ecologist around this question of how we understand the reciprocity between human and non-human, and one of the things that came up in that conversation was that the ecosystem and the entity will give back in some way. That you can feel this positive reciprocity through the way the system changes and how we are able to sustain each other rather use and exploit. So that can become a different form of communication to know what a non-human right might entail.



# CHAPTER FOUR

## GUSTS IN THE HOTHOUSE

### AIMÉE BEAUBIEN

Wild, fast-growing vines creep about the garage, slink through the yard, climb up and around the side of our Chicago home. I track their invasive movements. My studio is on the first floor of our house and steps away from the garden. On occasion, I yank out a stranglehold of thickly entwining morning glories, pluck their heart-shaped leaves off and roll rambling trails to dry into large tumbleweeds before they choke too many other plants in our tiny backyard.

I take photographs. I make prints. From my prints, I continue to reconfigure subject matter while reworking images. While examining hand-woven structures, I photograph grass baskets and continue returning to a growing collection of images with the impulse to cut my grass basket photographs apart in order to weave them back together.

When I first started pushing my cut-up photographs into sculptural forms, I grabbed what was within reach to prop material up during construction. In the process of making, I reached for things in my home like cups, colanders, mixing bowls and vases. Very quickly things from my domestic space travelled with my work and into exhibitions; including a growing collection of lemons that had dried before their sourness could be squeezed.

Depictions of a multi-dimensional world rendered flat in prints reach new expressions as I weave visual impressions together. Drooping, pitched and placed. Sloping, jutting, braced. Holding, planted and spread. Leaning, shooting, bedded, staked. My pictured plant forms are constructed through processes of translation, revision, cutting and reassembling; reflecting on the complexity of the garden and of the photographic encounter.

Some qualities of the garden run parallel to the nature of photography: both can be defined by interactions of the scientific, the accidental and the temporal. My approach to building installations feels similar to how I treat my tiny backyard garden. My garden in life, and in





[Fig. 4.1]

**Aimée Beaubien**

*Chitter-burst-tangle-swell* (detail), cut-up pigment prints, wooden dowels, ceramic bowl, glass bottles, ceramic jugs, needle point foot stool, wooden table, and miniature clothespins, 2015, courtesy of the artist © Aimée Beaubien



[Fig. 4.2]

**Aimée Beaubien**

*Hothouse Cuttings* (installation view), cut-up pigment prints, color laser prints, paracord, miniature clothespins, hammock swings, grow lights on fabric cord, dried lemons and limes, 2018, courtesy of the artist © Aimée Beaubien

the life of exhibitions, is much like a large-scale canvas to explore the potentials of wild compositional experiments.

Gardens portray time. Interdependent systems grow, bloom, intertwine and die. With live plants coexisting in my studio with photographs of plant matter, I began to incorporate dried botanical elements into my installations. Death is steeped in photography and dried plants alike.

Photography images the world as beguiling fragments. Our contemporary lives are lived in a series of interrupted fragments. Sampling and re-mixing are interwoven throughout our daily experiences. Cut-up techniques are employed in literature, music, cinema, visual art and popular culture.

Moments drift. I crowd in with my camera to draw connections through different conditions in a manner that I imagine in which information travels through systems and bodies. The act of replacing a complete image in the process of inventing a new one seems analogous to the ways that I process information and reconstruct memories. I think I know something but that thing and my relationship to it continues to transform.

Working in an exploratory manner, I place myself somewhere not entirely familiar and crowded into situations where I learn as I go. During a residency at the Roger Brown home in New Buffalo, Michigan, I learned that, at one point, Roger had a collection of 50 different varieties of roses on his property. I look with photography. While I looked out of Roger's windows I re-assembled ribbons of cut photographs into flexible interlocking structures, mimicking the plant movements in front of me.

Many photographic gestures can be traced back to photography pioneer William Henry Fox Talbot. Geoffrey Batchen wrote of Talbot's photograph of honeysuckle from 1844: "Talbot crowds his camera into the bush of flowering honeysuckle, resulting in a remarkably three-dimensional picture. Looking at this image, we feel as though we too are peering into these branches, our field of vision totally filled by its light-dappled petals and stems. The photograph is at once realist and abstract, and thus points to a paradoxical aspect of photographic vision that many future practitioners would also learn to exploit."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the seasons and over her lifetime, my great-grandmother Gertrude photographed the changing conditions in her garden. The many ways that she used her camera to look closely to discover a jack in the pulpit and to hold onto ephemeral matter—like her short-lived blooming peonies—have always loomed large in my imagination. Often my great-grandmother included detailed information about what was not available in her front facing views: "Here's a picture of my mums. They were 4 inches across. Everyone stopped to look at them!"<sup>2</sup>

I have a timeline of photographic processes over Gertrude's lifetime and fragmented views into her enduring fascination with the things that grew around my great-grandmother. Her color palates, eccentric compositions, and written observations of what wasn't pictured were my first point of photographic contact and remain my most enduring guide. I remember hesitating a long while before declaring the garden as subject, the garden as point of departure. I am an artist with 1970's toile wallpaper of romantic pastoral scenes still hanging in what is now the entryway to my studio. I am an artist working with family photos. I am an artist photographing flowers. While these categories may only suggest my gender, they do not attest to my dedicated experimentation with the flexibility of photographic images and the materiality of photographs for

<sup>1</sup> Batchen, Geoffrey, and Fox Talbot, William Henry (2008) *William Henry Fox Talbot*. Phaidon Press

<sup>2</sup> Handwritten on verso, c-print, circa 1950's, from archive: Gertrude Bastien, born 12, Mar. 1985, died Sept. 1982.

over three decades. My earliest photographic impulses came of a desire to draw attention to how pictures are constructed.

I use photography to record my responses to present conditions in color, pattern, structure, and place. I continue to photograph in my garden, my mother's garden, as well as public and private gardens while keeping my great-grandmother's observations in mind. An anthropologist approached me after I presented some of my plant related works at the Botanical Speculations Symposium.<sup>3</sup> She spoke of research about photonic sensation and photonic choreography as it relates to what she could see demonstrated in the ways that I make my work. Charles Darwin was entangled in the daily rhythms of life. His home and garden were experimental spaces where he entered into what has been called a sensory partnership with his subjects. He moved and was moved by subjects in nature.

My work is driven by the transformative potential between image and material, and by the generative and cumulative strategies of making. I use photography to hold onto a short-lived and waning bloom as others have before me. Comprised of partial views, my constructions make physical seams visible where fragments meet and overlap. Collage and sculpture are intertwined in their material making for me. Photography optically frames and records traces of materiality, object becomes image, and then cut-up and woven back into an object again.

I use collage to investigate oscillations between photographic depiction and material form. What may be perceived in my entanglements slips between recognition and abstraction: from a sky, an apple in a tree, into topography. I take whatever I have pointed to with my camera and convert it into tangled inventions that overlap and intersect; upending conventions of foreground, middle-ground, background; and flipping expectations of subject, object, and motion. Experience morphs into fields of color and pattern and back again.

My studio is marked by cycles of processes at various stages of development. Hanging dried and drying plants mingle with huge tangles of cut and woven photographic pieces. Matter dangles down from the ceiling in states of progress and decay. Marked by seasonality, by various internal cycles of life moving at different speeds, gardens are conveyors of time from the evolutionary to the ephemeral. I photograph the ever-changing conditions in my studio, as plants dry and projects grow.

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<sup>3</sup> "Botanical Speculations Symposium." School of the Art Institute of Chicago, 29 Sept. 2017, [www.saic.edu/academics/areasofstudy/artandscience/conversationsonartandscience/series/events/botanical-speculations-symposium](http://www.saic.edu/academics/areasofstudy/artandscience/conversationsonartandscience/series/events/botanical-speculations-symposium).



Each fall microscopic cells designed like scissors appear where the leaf stem meets the branch to push the leaf away. I excised leaf shapes from my photographs, leaving their rectangular backgrounds intact. The negative spaces within these remnants become an evocative frame suggesting the inevitability of fallen leaves while also resembling dappled light through a canopy of trees. As I stack and bind remainders together, I am reminded of the collection of pages in a book. It is noted that in 1,789 poems, Emily Dickinson refers to plants nearly 600 times. The herbarium collection she created contains more than 400 plant specimens. Archaeologists have been uncovering and restoring Emily Dickinson's garden in an effort to better understand her personal physical world and source of imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Gardens are collections. They are nature gathered together in public space or private refuge. Interdependent systems grow, bloom, multiply,



[Fig. 4.3]

**Aimée Beaubien**

*Cuttings* (detail), 142 page spiral bound artist book, 2017, courtesy of the artist and the Donut Shop © Aimée Beaubien

<sup>4</sup> Farr, Judith (2016) *The Lost Gardens of Emily Dickinson*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press)

intertwine and die. Photography is used for many purposes that extend far and wide. Concentrated material investigation guides new developments in my work. I use photographic paper as sculptural material testing the flexibility of printed images. With photography, I weave visual impressions together.

What is building inside my studio is connected to what is happening on the outside and inside of our tiny garden. The excitement of spring's arrival in my garden inevitably makes its way into my work as moments from my everyday have become integrated into the structures of my sculptures and installations. I interact with familiar photographic observations and push them into something else. Forward or backward, reaching or touching, pulling between inside and out. I think I know something but that thing and my relationship to it continues to transform. I put things together with photographs because they are charged with the specificity of a caught moment that is inherently associated with the medium.



[Fig. 4.4]

**Aimée Beaubien**

*Collecting Within* (detail). Artist book with a stack of 60 accordions in origami cube, 2017, courtesy of the artist © Aimée Beaubien

When vines started growing on one side of our home, I followed their growth patterns. In my garden installations, cut photographic forms interweave, encircle and hang; trail in ribbon-like shreds and become wild ornamental outgrowths as I move with and am moved by living forms. The vine wrapping around our home finally reached my second-floor bedroom and climbed into my dreams. I could feel the vine pass through the window just one foot from where I sleep and enter into the left side of my body while woven elements from my work travelled in from the right to meet somewhere in the middle for an entwining dance.

As objects from my home have made their way into my work, I have found parallels to respond to in different exhibition environments. Each new version in an ongoing series of *Hothouse* works offers a garden space defined by interactions of order and disorder. Bold leaf shapes and twisting ribbons of color entwine, dangle, cluster and creep in makeshift exhibitions. The conditions of different exhibition sites inform a new chain of experiential shifts between visual representation and the physical



[Fig. 4.5]

**Aimée Beaubien**

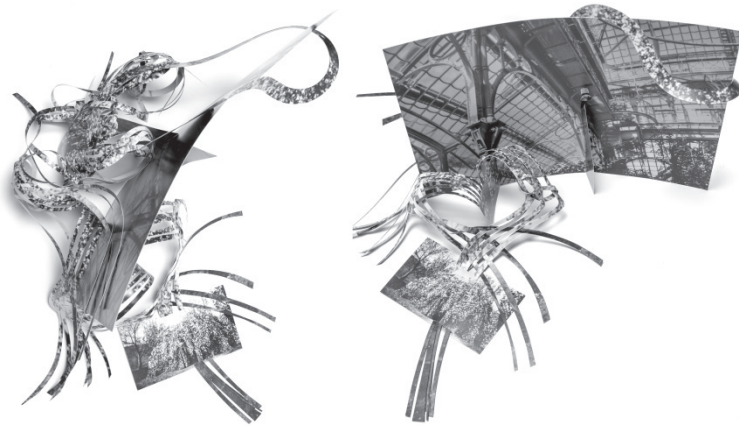
*Gusts in the Hothouse*, 2016, cut-up pigment prints, paracord, miniature clothespins, grow lights, oscillating fan, 2016, courtesy of the artist © Aimée Beaubien



encounter. *Gusts in the Hothouse* was a completely enclosed terrarium for my garden photos. I placed grow lights and a household oscillating fan inside the glass box to keep my double-sided photographs gently swaying with movement and suggestive of living things soaking up the magenta glow.

In *Camera Lucida*,<sup>5</sup> Roland Barthes wrote about his relationship to a photograph of his mother when she was a child and standing in a glassed-in plant conservatory. This winter garden photograph that we never see, is the catalyst for a deeply personal investigation into the nature of photographs that includes meditations on the relationship of images to death, time, memory and desire. I re-photographed a teeny, tiny photo Gertrude took of a woman in a flowing flower print dress, absorbed in a weeping cherry tree. Then I cut and wove it together with photographs that I had taken over 20 years ago in the Palm House Conservatory at the Schönbrunn Palace in Vienna.

Gardens are solace: of leisure, labor, and our attention. They are displays for botanical taxonomies, for our fascination with nature and our desire to order it. In 1989, I walked with my mother through Claude Monet's spectacular garden where he lived and worked from 1883 until 1926.



[Fig. 4.6]

**Aimée Beaubien**

*Taken*, cut-up pigment prints, 2017, courtesy of the artist © Aimée Beaubien

<sup>5</sup> Barthes, Roland, and Howard, Richard. (1981) *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. (New York City: Hill and Wang)

I look closely into an amazing garden my mother continues to create and think that I see glimpses of the interior life of someone I find hard to know. I recognize patterns in the things I photograph. A still image is never really as static and frozen as it may appear.

Different seeing areas in the brain map the scene to string together movement, color, depth, and shape in order to organize an impression informed by the many observed parts. I reorganize available visual information, modifying the experience and speed of recognition. How much can I cut away? What will agitate associations? I put things together and tear them apart in performances of revision. I vacillate between producing connective moments and making active gestures extending marks across the field of view, often creating turbulent conditions.

Directed by experience, feeling, thought and uncertainty; between the focus on the line and the focus on the edge and the field of focus presented in the photograph. I construct collisions between what appears on the surface of images and what is made absent through acts of incising and extracting.

One image becomes the starting point and then I build picture-relationships while drawing connections between different pictured conditions. Often there are pictures inside of pictures and shapes that I have reshaped. I travel through illusionistic planes to create these tangles, knots, and webs, as I weave an emotive fabric together. Through it all, I continue to manipulate my photographs into becoming a series of moving parts, pushing their capacity to change and to transform experimenting with the many ways that I can alter the sensation of reading a photo.

Where does meaning appear on the surface of things captured? Propelled by the provocative nature of the push and pull between recognition and abstraction, I fill openings, re-write moments and rework experiences, as is often the case in the act of recollecting. While the individual photographic components may be easily reproduced, it is my hand that makes each of these thousands of cuts. I never bring all of these elements together in precisely the same manner more than once.

Subjects are veiled, environments turned upside down, cut open and apart. Before cutting up any photographs from Gertrude's archive, I transcribe all of her captions. On the back of her fading, partial view of Hawaii from October 1965, she wrote: "Put these rainbow pictures together and you see whole rainbow."<sup>6</sup> I keep looking for all of the others. While photography offers a realistic window onto the world I continue changing the shapes of my windows.

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<sup>6</sup> Handwritten on verso, c-print, Oct. 1965, from archive: Gertrude Bastien.

## Q&A

**Giovanni Aloï:** How are your intricate installations stored after they come down, and of course you can reverse that question, how are they set up? They look extremely laborious and delicate. So, that's my question 'A'. My question B which is "what's the role of beauty, in a classical sense, in your work?"

**Aimée Beaubien:** I've lots of different storing methods. A lot of things are affixed to my ceiling. Oh, I will say that I was the first artist to ever deliver artwork in giant garbage bags to the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, and the curators thought it was hilarious. So, yes, there's artwork all over the place in bags, underneath, and on top of things, everywhere. I do reuse all materials, and so I am always trying to take things apart and put things back together and find new ways to push the material around.

Our relationship to beauty isn't purely subjective when external influences shape beauty standards. While my work possesses characteristics of beauty I haven't felt compelled to isolate a flower to proclaim its supreme beauty. Rather, I build lush, layered environments and create a complex of interconnectedness that embraces the complicated nature of beauty.

**Audience:** Plants have been objectified in the history of representation — this applies to painting as well as it does to photography. Does your work comply or challenge past notions of objectification?

**Beaubien:** I use my camera to look closely at plants. Through this open-ended close-looking approach I create collections of printed records to look at again and again. Often, I distort scale relationships, push color around and cut my notations up to completely reorganize the material and experience. I weave together prints on paper to build a series of interdependent components used to construct immersive environments. These paper-objects are not fixed in order to explore alternative configurations for each exhibition. I pay attention to plant movements and explore potential sensations through the many ways that I weave my impressions together. While observing plants and following vines, I think about ways to translate their gestures and patterns of growth through the conditions that I create.

**Aloï:** What are the specific technical challenges that working with collaged three-dimensional pieces entail? I am thinking more specifically

about the materiality of the photographic medium, its durability, and fragility.

**Beaubien:** At first, I built terrible fragile sculptures of woven photographs that teetered and wobbled on precarious stacks of furniture. Only the tension in the weave of the prints held my photo sculptures together making everything ridiculously difficult to transport. Now I make components that are much easier to move around and manipulate in direct response to each specific exhibition space. I play with weight and balance while constructing makeshift networked systems. Everything I make is laborious. The processes I naturally gravitate towards require time, energy, patience, and skill. I have tested many different inkjet paper types to determine what materials hold up to a certain degree of handling required in the making of my layered installations. Some physical stresses can be too much for the paper to bear. Through experimentation, I continue to discover crucial make-or-break thresholds in my studio to be better prepared for what may occur when on location installing new works.

**Audience:** What plants do you grow in your garden and what framework of ideas justifies the inclusion of some plants and the exclusion of others? Do you have favourite plants?

**Beaubien:** A scraggly rose, hens-and-chicks, bee balm, daylilies, mint, wild strawberry, Queen Anne's lace and moss were in the yard before we arrived and have a strong will to survive. We transplanted much from the first garden I worked on with my husband when we moved about a decade ago. Spring flowers may be my favorite after extra-long cold seasons in Chicago. During the waning days of winter excitement builds with the first emerging crocus followed by patches of daffodils, hyacinth, tulips, allium, bleeding hearts and every year I regret having not planted more bulbs. We introduce a little something here and there to see what might happen in relationship to already established Solomon's seal, lungwort, brown-eyed Susan, clematis, peonies, purple coneflower, lupine and varieties of hostas, columbine, sedum, lilies, ferns, and hydrangea. Pots are placed on shelves running along the length of the garage and are filled with herbs and some annuals. A wild grape vine from three houses over began wrapping itself around our garage a few years ago and now climbs one side of our home. I fight with morning glories throughout the growing season but let some grow along our shared fences. I track their growth patterns and yank them out in bulk whenever their stranglehold on neighboring plants appears to threaten. Some of our oldest plants were gifts from friends splitting

specimens in their thriving gardens. We never have a master garden plan but after answering this question I actually have greater appreciation for what is happening in such a tiny city yard!



## CHAPTER FIVE

### PLANT PRESENCE

MEGHAN MOE BEITIKS, JENNY KENDLER,  
CAROLINE PICARD AND ASHLEY GILLANDERS

*This panel comprised SAIC alumni and current students who were asked to think about plant-presence through a work of art of their own and one by another artist in order to outline productivities and challenges involved in encounter plants—whether they be in our created environments, such as the art gallery or the greenhouse—or whether we may choose to meet them on their own turf. The panel comes to an end with the contribution of SAIC student Ashley Gillanders whose work considers the complexities involved in accessing plant being beneath the veneer of capitalist economies.*

#### **Meghan Moe Beitiks—*The Plant is Present***

Before I came to grad school at SAIC, I discovered the work of Vaughn Bell, which had this unique relationship to plants and our perception of the environment—it was conceptually sharp, engaged with plants as living organisms, but it was also just hilarious. *Village Green*, comprised a series of works called *Personal Biospheres*. They are a collection of plexiglass encasements that contain tiny greenhouses. Visitors are invited to put their heads up into them and experience a kind of private biodome. So, you have your own private greenhouse, but then, the witnessing of these life forms is also on display for anyone who happens to be within proximity of the work. The visitor's body thus appear split: the bottom half remains human; the head is a greenhouse. The piece ultimately encourages and forces an intimate encounter with plant forms while also being self-mocking, absurd, and exposing the awkwardness of our own humanness. Much of what's interesting about this work, in my opinion, lies in the anthropomorphism involved and the ability *Village Green* has to question





[Fig. 5.1]

**Vaughn Bell**

*One Big House*, 2009, Commissioned by the Edith Russ Site for New Media Art in Oldenburg, Germany. Acrylic, hardware, plants, soil, organic matter, water, and water sprayer. Photo: Franz Waeuhof © Vaughn Bell

its usefulness and limits, thus asking how can we make plants present, or be present with them?

One of the works that I have made that is the most directly relevant to the idea of plant presence was created during my first semester in grad school in 2011 at SAIC, when the artworld was still discussing the effects of Marina Abramovich's work at the Museum of Modern Art, *The Artist is Present*,<sup>1</sup> in which she invited participants to come and sit in front of her as long as they felt comfortable doing. Visitors lined up for hours for the chance to sit across from a famous performance artist.<sup>2</sup> "Marina Abramovich Made Me Cry" memes began to circulate online. They mocked individuals who overwhelmed by their emotions and torn by the intensity of the experience began to cry.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Performance duration: March 14-May 31st, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010](https://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/marina-abramovic-marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present-2010)

<sup>3</sup> <http://marinaabramovicmademecry.tumblr.com/>

Abramovich's stillness and laconic silence suggested the potential intensity of plant presence. I felt compelled to produce a companion piece in which a plant could be cast as a performance artist. So, I positioned a mother in law's tongue plant (*Sansevieria trifasciata*) on a chair. This particular performer was lent to me by performance faculty member Werner Herterich, who grew this enormous plant, and let me carry it down to the Columbus building. I then tried to mimic Marina Abramovich's lighting setup the best that I could, and invited participants to sit in a chair with a plant for as long as they so desired. To reassess the fame and importance of this ubiquitous plant, I recorded myself giving a lecture on the accomplishments of *Sansevieria*. The video was available for viewing in the lobby, so to be seen prior to the encounter. Participants sat with the plant, they actually did—sometimes they did so only for a short time, and sometimes for longer spans of time. I asked them to record their responses in a journal before they left. Some read "This is boring" and "strange" and others-- "this was incredibly peaceful and meditative" and "thank you." Two participants had sat with both Marina and the Plant, and one of them said, "Marina was exactly as interesting." The Plant also travelled to the First International Science Art Conference & Exhibition in Moscow, where responses were largely similar—it had a very solid fan base there as well. In the case of *The Plant is Present*, the question of presence itself becomes one of *time*, and the amount of time that we allow ourselves to spend with an entity; the *generosity* of presence, and giving time and focus to an entity, and letting new relationships emerge in that time spent.

Below is an excerpt from the lecture I gave on the artistic career of *Sansevieria*:

You are steps away from "The Plant is Present": an epic performance by *Sansevieria trifasciata*. *Trifasciata*, commonly known as "Mother-in-Law's Tongue," or "Snake Plant," is well known for its contributions to Landscape Design, but has only recently been recognized for its tireless effort to clean the air, its dramatic ability to suffer abuse and neglect, and its tremendous level of bodily sacrifice in devotion to the aesthetic and biological needs of humans. In a seminal work, *trifasciata* was employed by NASA to remove toxins like benzene, formaldehyde, and trichloroethylene from the air, while in a sealed room. Other performers, like Areca Palm and English Ivy, were also put to task. NASA found *trifasciata* to be one of the top performers in pollutant removal, and published the results of this collaboration.



[Fig. 5.2]

**Meghan Moe Beitiks***The Plant is Present*, installation view, 2011, photo courtesy of SAIC © Meghan Moe Beitiks

*Trifasciata* also has a powerful aesthetic presence. Stately, sharp and keen, with strong vertical lines, the plant is virtually ubiquitous in modern landscape design. *Trifasciata*'s artistic presence has become so powerful as to border on cliché. In this sense, it's not unlike the much-lorded over of the plant inspires mimicry and copycatting. This particular plant is also famous for thriving on neglect, able to go months without water or proper light. As with Abramovich in the center of a burning 5-point star, in a work called "Rhythm 5", in which she became unconscious due to lack of oxygen. You may sit with the plant for as long as you like, your sitting will be photographed and archived. Enjoy the presence of *trifasciata* in a way that not many have: fully and personally.

A selection of comments from visitors:

*SAIC*

- "It's nice to sit with something that listens in peace."
- "The plant is both really expressive and really calm. It was amazing to spend time with such an amazing artist."
- "This is boring :)"

- “That made my night. At first I was like Uhhh . . . but then I sat with it and really enjoyed it. It was pretty deep. and adorable and made me super happy I wanna hang out with the plant again. Awesome setting too. It basically kicked ass → and I wanted to tell the plant all my deep dark secrets.”
- “I felt a connection to the plant and was able to live in the moment.”
- “Marina was exactly as interesting.”
- “It’s like it was looking into my truth.”
- “I felt present with the plant.”

### *MOSCOW*

- “For me it was strange”
- “I was feeling calm & secure sitting in front of this plant even I sit for just a few seconds. Nice experience. I would try to do it at home.”
- “It was very friendly to be with the plant face to face.”

## Jenny Kendler—*A Confounding Mimicry*



[Fig. 5.3]

**Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride**

*A Confounding Mimicry* at the Lincoln Park Conservatory for Experimental Sound Studio, 4-channel sound with 14 accompanying signs in English & Spanish (Installation View), 2017 © Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride

*A Confounding Mimicry* is a 4-channel sound and visual installation created in collaboration with my husband, sound artist Brian Kirkbride for the Lincoln Park Conservatory's Fern Room. For many years, Experimental Sound Studio has worked with the Conservatory to place experimental sound work in this free and publicly accessible space. Though the Fern Room is sometimes used simply as a beautiful backdrop for sounds-based compositions about any manner of subjects, for us, the opportunity to engage directly with the plants in the space was extremely important... and too exciting to pass up. Just as the Fern Room itself mimics a "natural" space, we wanted to play with the public's expectations of what the coincident "natural" sound of the Fern Room might be. So, upon entering the humid and fragrant room where our work was installed, you would hear what you might have expected to hear: something akin to a nature soundtrack, resonant with the calls of rainforest birds. However, an ornithologist, a careful listener, or anyone who read the text accompanying the project, would soon realize that all was not as it

seemed. Half the bird calls were invented and completely synthesized using a method which used the ferns themselves to give the imaginary birds a voice.

Brian and I had recently hiked in Costa Rica's stunning Monteverde Cloud Forest, a tropical jungle redolent with ferns in every shade of green and filled with the strange calls of unseen birds. We began to think of that mountaintop as the "wild" analog which the captive and highly curated space of the Fern Room mimics. (As you can see, layers of mimicry infiltrate this project from just about every angle...) Using photographs of the ferns in the conservatory's Fern Room, alongside photos of ferns from the Monteverde Cloud Forest, we employed special image-to-audio conversion software to turn these images into sound.

As you can see above, there is a natural "mimicry" between the shape of ferns, the shape of feathers, and the sonograms (visual representations) of bird calls. Because of this aesthetic analogy, when an image of a fern is "played" the sound it produces already is somewhat like a bird call. Minimal manipulation of the images easily yielded a number of



[Fig. 5.4]

**Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride**

*A Confounding Mimicry* at the Lincoln Park Conservatory for Experimental Sound Studio, 4-channel sound with 14 accompanying signs in English & Spanish (Installation Detail), 2017  
© Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride





[Fig. 5.5]

**Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride**

*A Confounding Mimicry* at the Lincoln Park Conservatory for Experimental Sound Studio, 4-channel sound with 14 accompanying signs in English & Spanish (Image from the artists' invented book), 2017 © Jenny Kendler & Brian Kirkbride

convincing fern-based, bird-mimic calls. Interestingly—and intentionally—the real bird calls in the recording were the ones listeners would be likely to guess were created. While photographing our wild ferns, we also recorded the calls of Monteverde's birds, which are among some of the world's most incredible: The loud metallic bonk-shriek call of the real-but-fantastical-sounding Three-Wattled Bellbird (*Procnias tricarunculatus*) certainly sounded more invented than our believable fern-calls.

So, with these fern-calls, how might sound help us encounter plants in a new way? Having become so visually oversaturated, surrounded by HD advertising and glowing screens, it can be hard to *really see* anything anew. By instead *sonifying* plant-presences, we hoped to allow our listeners/viewers to walk a new path, destabilizing the boundary between the 'real' and the 'artificial' to suggest new methods of encounter. This assemblage triangulating plants, birds, and human beings allowed for new juxtapositions and surprising new alliances. And through the project's many layers of mimicry, we also hoped to remind viewers to always look





[Fig. 5.6]

**Ana Mendieta**

*Imágen de Yágul (Image from Yagul)*, 1973 Lifetime color photograph, 19 x 12.5 inches (48.3 x 31.8 cm) © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

or listen closely—because what you see or hear, in these times of calcified dichotomies and mediated forms, is not necessarily evidence of the real. To truly encounter plants, we may need more poetic forms of approach...looking from a side-eye, listening with our eyes closed, hearing plants in the voices of invented birds...

And, as was requested, I would also like to present a historical work in conversation with my own plant-centric project. Ana Mendieta was an important pioneer in the speculations on art and ecology, plant-bodies, and the human-animal-body. *Imagen de Yagul* harkens back, in certain ways, to the film that was screened at the beginning of *Botanical Speculations: The Secret Life of Plants*, which was made around the same time as Mendieta's photographs. At this current cultural moment, I suggest there is new relevance in re-examining the creative work of the early environmental movement of the 1970s—the artistic and cultural aesthetics which communicated, emoted and defined the dawn of the environmental movement in the United States.

The 1970s saw the emergence of a new cultural awareness around human beings' impact on the natural world: flaming rivers, plummeting bird populations, poisoning scares. As a thick blanket of smog lay over Los Angeles, this decade brought the first Earth Day, the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act—interestingly, all of which were completely bipartisan bills, passed under Richard Nixon, a Republican president. During this decade, an aesthetic was crafted around this nascent movement, dubbed Environmentalism, which looked to the back-to-the-land movement, the handcrafted, the Hippie, the Pagan, and often aesthetically and conceptually cast the Earth as female, evoking the ancient and iconic image of the Earth Goddess—literally *the original icon*.

In *Imagen de Yagul* and other works such as *Tree of Life*, Mendieta suggests a deep-rooted continuity between the human-body and the plant-body. In *Imagen de Yagul*, Mendieta conjures the earth as both grave and garden—a place of celebrated death and sensuous new growth—reminding us that we the eaters of plants are eventually eaten by plants, in return.

And in our modern era, we know this continuity is literal in a number of surprising ways. Chlorophyll helps plants make their living from light—in an act that is essentially magic as far as we might choose to define it—the act of spinning sun into sugar. This process becomes the root of sustenance for almost all beings on earth—this thread of spun sun-energy connecting us all to a deep green origin.



[Fig. 5.7]

**Ana Mendieta**

*Tree of Life*, 1976, Lifetime color photograph 20 x 13.25 inches (50.8 x 33.7 cm) © The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection, LLC Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

Looking more closely at chlorophyll's molecular structure, nestled inside a ring of nitrogen, carbon, hydrogen and oxygen is a single atom of magnesium. It is an astonishing wonder (and yet also has a sense of rightness) that hemoglobin, the molecule which transports oxygen to every cell in our own human bodies, shares almost this exact form, but holds an atom of reddening iron at its center. Even in our own deep scarlet blood, another theme in Mendieta's work, we echo this kinship to greenness.

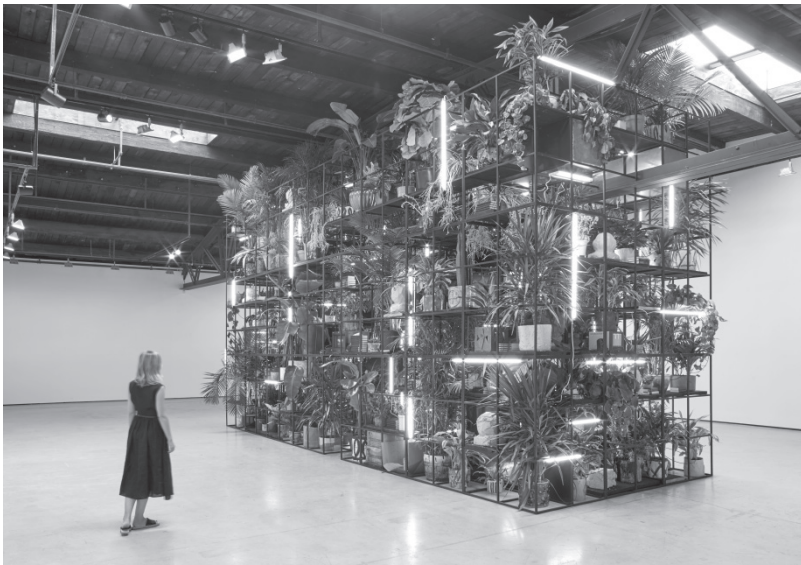
Mendieta drew these connections, sometimes literally, in blood and sap, pursuing personal, bodily encounters with plants and the earth/Earth. Her work powerfully confronted the deeply held founding myths of patriarchal civilization: that we are separate from, and moreover elevated above, plants and the natural world. For this reason, the mainstream discounted her work, calling it too "raw," too "primal," too emotional—all code words for *too feminine, too earthy*. Mendieta's imagery and the aesthetics of the Environmental movement made many uncomfortable, with their inherent premise of radical permeability, a return to a non-commercial, non-extractive way of interacting with the Earth and an urgent need to displace current hierarchies. This new aesthetic turn was dismissed by dominant culture as being "touchy-feely" and unserious—again concepts knitted up in a patriarchal critique of womankind, and an attempt to preserve dominant structures of power and capital. Perhaps, also, there was a deep and unspoken fear of the Earth goddess' return.

As we stand on the edge of ecological collapse, it is a more important moment than ever to re-conjure and unearth this buried earth/Earth goddess and adopt her radical permeability as a new modality for interactions with plants and others. With my work and with Mendieta's, I hope to suggest poetic methodologies for a de-habitation of prior unilateral and hierarchical relations with the non-human world. Let us instead conceive of ourselves as one continuity: our animal bodies, plant bodies, nourishing one another—side by side in the green flowing sap of life and time, here on our beautiful Mother Earth.



## Caroline Picard—Belonging in Breath

Upon entering Rashid Johnson's 2017 exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Museum, *Hail We Now Sing Joy*, you first encounter *Antoine's Organ*, a towering steel, modernist grid populated with potted plants, grow lights, books, video works, shea butter, and—in the installation's center—a concealed, raised piano. As the largest architectural grid Johnson has thus far exhibited in the U.S., the installation is twenty-eight feet wide and more than ten feet tall, dwarfing attending viewers with its immediate depiction of structure, history, and intervention; these themes are particularly present in the potted plants which overwhelm any right angles with verdant growth. *Antoine's Organ* is, on one level, a searching self-portrait of the artist—showing how his artistic history and a pantheon of influences drive his material investigations. Yet the piece reflects a more general methodology as well, one in which the structured grid—with all its historic associations—is out staged by a suite of subjective materials.



[Fig. 5.8]

**Rashid Johnson**

*Antoine's Organ*, mixed media, Hauser and Wirth, NYC, 2016. Courtesy the Artist and Hauser and Wirth. Photo: Martin Parsekian © Rashid Johnson

The resulting assemblage makes autonomy and collectivity difficult to separate. No one item is simple or discrete. Where one tries to identify a clarified, individual voice, one discovers instead the propulsion of influences. The gridded scaffold references minimalist sculpture—a school of production predominantly occupied by white men—but also a Cartesian approach to categorizing information. Against that structure curved lines gain significance for their contrasting flexibility. “The grid is inherently part of how I saw drawing, mark making, [and] gesture,”<sup>4</sup> Johnson says, as though the grid provides a frame against which his own individualized mark can stand out. But if the plants offer that organic intervention with the line of a leaf, Johnson cannot take full credit. He does not control the pattern of growth; instead he is responsible for potting, positioning, and maintaining the vegetation. Here too, one conceives each plant as an individual. As many as 250 cactus, ferns, and palm trees originating from different parts of the world congregate within the, arguably multicultural, grid. Each plant is distinguished by the pot that contain it—pots made by the artist and both belying his hand while delineating the plant its own plot of earth. The plants become citizens of the work even to the point that they must negotiate one another as they grow. From a distance, however, they blend together, becoming a blanket of foliage: a collective.

Other items in the tableau include mounds of shea butter—what Johnson calls “a complicated material”<sup>5</sup> for its healing properties, ubiquitous appearance in Western skin products, and too easily forgotten point of origin in Africa. Whereas Joseph Beuys incorporated animal fat for its transcendental properties, Johnson’s shea butter comes from a nut, is tied to systems of global production, and bears the politics of African diaspora: this material acknowledges historic trauma and exploitation even while providing a literal and practical salve for the body. But *Antoine’s Organ* attends also to the mind. Multiple copies of the same books like Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, Paul Beatty’s *The Sellout*, Debra Dickerson’s *The End of Blackness*, and Randall Kennedy *Sellout: The Politics of Racial Betrayal* appear with additional titles from Søren Kierkegaard and Alcoholics Anonymous. Reoccurring multiple times in the same installation, these books reinforce a vertiginous experience; walking around the perimeter one is re-reminded of the same titles while remaining

<sup>4</sup> “Artist Rashid Johnson Explores Race, Yearning and Escape,” *To The Best of Our Knowledge*, July 16, 2017 online. Accessed 08/20/2017

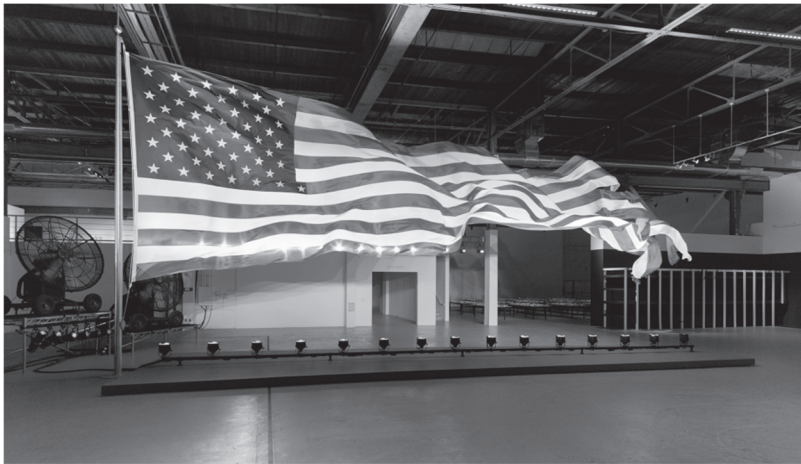
<https://www.tbbook.org/interview/artist-rashid-johnson-explores-race-yearning-and-escape>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

unable to pick up any one and access its contents. Johnson populates the installation with multiples of himself as well. Several small televisions screen Johnson's past video works in which he is bound by discrete loops at different points in the artist's life. In this way, even the artist's individuality melds into a plural and polyvocal subject. "I want to have an autonomous voice," he has said, "but my autonomy is consistently in jeopardy to the collective."<sup>6</sup>

The politics of Johnson's work are internal and inescapable, creating a layered and claustrophobic search for an essential self; instead of yielding any rarefied "I", the work instead suggests a kaleidoscopic subject that is contingent on a constellation of things. Up close, unique individuals stand out—a plant, its pot, a performance, a book—figures that become cumulative gestures when one steps back. In this way, the self has internalized a dense net of politics that restrict and enable all of the figures in its framework, even the plants.

By contrast, William Pope.L's 2015 Geffen Contemporary exhibition, *Trinket*, at MOCA externalizes politics, blowing them into the very atmosphere visitors breath. One's first sense of this comes from a



[Fig. 5.9]

**William Pope.L**

Installation view of *Trinket* at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, CA, 2015, Courtesy of the artist; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest © Pope.L

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid





[Fig. 5.10]

**William Pope.L**

Installation view of *Trinket* at The Geffen Contemporary at MOCA, Los Angeles, CA, 2015, Courtesy of the artist; Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Photo: Brian Forrest © Pope.L

massive and theatrical American flag blown hard by industrial fans that slowly shred the fabric to strips. While not visible from all parts of the exhibition, the sound of the fans and the feel of their breeze are omnipresent, blowing throughout each of the show's auxiliary rooms. This strange, cooling breath serves as a reminder of national identity, its aggressive bearing, and subsequent fragility. Yet also, the show is infused with the smell of onions—hard to identify at first, as one doesn't necessarily expect to smell rotting vegetables in a museum. Corners of the

building hold seemingly innocuous piles of black and white painted onions, ad hoc, like abandoned croquet balls. These appear without explanation and seem too small to represent the associative smell.

In an adjacent room in the far corner of the space, however, you find a larger presentation of *Polis or the Garden or Human Nature in Action* (1998/2015) to which those less conspicuous piles belong. Both represent an ongoing, site-specific installation comprised by onions painted the color of national flags: red, black, white, blue. The onions are placed in various arrangements in a given exhibition space where they either decompose or grow, depending on the environmental conditions they are subject to: how humid, how dry, how hot or cold: these variables conspire along with the chemicals given off by surrounding onions and together determine whether fellow onions will sprout or rot.

In this far room, the onions are ordered in a grid, sitting in holes on picnic tables. Each one reads like an individual, ordered according to its position on the grid. Over the course of the exhibition, these onions change. Delicate green stalks shoot up, like hopeful arms, reaching for something impossible. Other onions rot, eventually looking like deflated balls. Together, they create an ecological community, at once metaphorical and literal: changing according to one another and as a result of pheromones and chemicals invisible to the human eye. Pope.L amplifies the presence of these painted vegetables both as individuals and as a collective community—a slippage accentuated by the work's title which implies a political citizenship via “polis,” remains simply a human cultivated activity via “garden,” and finally a more universal statement belying human nature.

If anything, what unifies so many of us under the flag is a growing sense of disenfranchisement. Just as the recognition of climate change and the impending ecological disaster moved from fringe knowledge to mainstream understanding, so now the realization is unfolding that the United States is not a functioning democracy.<sup>7</sup>

Both *Antoine's Organ* and *Polis or the Garden or Human Nature in Action* seek to isolate the relationship between a subject and a political environment. Johnson's pursuit results in an anxious hall of mirrors. Pope.L infuses the stress of political strife into the atmosphere of his exhibition, making it inescapable to individual viewers. Both evoke

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<sup>7</sup> Shaked, N. (2015) “Under the Banner of Contradiction: William Pope.L: Trinket, The Geffen Contemporary at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, March 20-June 28, 2015,” *XXTRA*, Fall, Volume 18, Number 1

similar questions: is one's identity simply a reaction to surrounding conditions? Or can we master our own fates? Yet Johnson's piece is not named Rashid's Organ, but Antoine's—its namesake a young jazz pianist, Antoine Baldwin, who played the piano in the sculpture's debut at Hauser and Wirth in New York.<sup>8</sup> In Milwaukee, the piano is used by additional performers at discrete times. The presence of this piano, even its physical position on a landing above the ground floor, activates a powerful interiority, one whose auratic presence endures throughout the day. Although the installation may or may not be activated by a pianist, the idea of music—as a thought that could emerge in the gallery space at any moment—is omnipresent. Both *Antoine's Organ* and *Polis or the Garden or Human Nature in Action* use plants to provide viewers with a visceral and immediate sense of interiority—whether that of the onion in a state of change, or the hidden piano—and in so doing beg questions about individual autonomy.

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<sup>8</sup> Gassman, G. (2017) "A Giant Art Installation With 250 Plants — and Live Jazz," *New York Times*, September 8.

### Ashley Gillanders—Tulip Mania

The Chicago Flower and Garden Show is an annual exhibition that takes place at Navy Pier every spring. The first exhibition, opening June 16th, 1847, was organized by the Chicago Horticultural Society as a showcase for prized fruits and flowers. Still held annually, the show is now the oldest event in Chicago, welcoming more than 40,000 attendees each year. Since 2011, the exhibition has been produced by Flower Show Productions, a large-scale event planning company, and is marketed to inspire, educate, and motivate the next generation of gardener. This past year's theme, "Chicago Blooming", featured elaborate life-sized gardening displays, live demonstrations and how-to workshops by landscape experts and television personalities, and a marketplace where festival-goers could shop the latest and greatest home and garden goods.

I first attended the exhibition on a whim one afternoon. After a few minutes of being there I knew that I needed to return with my camera. The following morning, I was granted after-hours access to Festival Hall B



[Fig. 5.11]

**Ashley Gillanders**

*Untitled (Gardening Live)*, archival inkjet print, 2017 © Ashley Gillanders

where I spent time alone photographing the strange and temporary landscape where displaced trees and flowers were presented and sold amongst new Subarus, cable television, deep fryers, and sleep number beds. A project that I worked on in 2013 titled *Curated Landscapes* focused on the influence that wealth has on residential landscaping in communities along the east coast of the United States. Using photographs, I captured examples of how wealth was physically altering and shaping natural forms. The ways in which gardening was being marketed in this environment was beginning to bring back these familiar thoughts; nature as an ephemeral status symbol and the garden as its display.

What I found to be particularly striking were the peculiar life-sized landscaping displays, designed and constructed specifically for the exhibition space to demonstrate different ways in which the amateur gardener could incorporate specific flowers, trees, and building materials into their own gardens. These displays included rose gardens with miniature versions of public art found in downtown Chicago and backyard-sized waterfalls. My favorite display was “Tulips Blooming”.



[Fig. 5.12]

**Ashley Gillanders**

*Untitled (Subaru)*, archival inkjet print, 2017 © Ashley Gillanders



Looking at the “Tulips Blooming” display in a photograph, the scene appears to be natural, however as I spend more time with it begins to resemble a theatrical stage. A wooden fence attempts to function as a stage curtain separating the outside “natural world” from the indoor exhibition space. Artificial fluorescent lighting tries to mimic the cool temperature of daylight. Various breeds of tulips are planted in bunches, separated by their breed and color, inside raised beds lined by young conifers and light grey brick. The movement of the tulips caused by the indoor heating system provides the illusion of a gentle spring breeze. In the background, behind the fence, a tall white staircase ascends along a white brick wall towards the exhibition hall offices.

While this simulation of nature is alluring and sometimes beautiful, it is also extremely problematic. In place of the so-called truth of nature, this environment requires one to first ignore or overlook the problems associated with this industry in order to fall under the spell of the illusion. Once I began to dissect the image the illusion was shattered, the scene began to unravel, and there was no going back. I couldn't stop



[Fig. 5.13]

**Ashley Gillanders**

*Untitled (Tulips Blooming)*, archival inkjet print, 2017 © Ashley Gillanders

wondering “Who built this display?”, “How much did it cost?”, “Where did the materials come from?”, “What will happen to these trees and flowers once the exhibition is over?”, and “How much waste is involved?”. I was simultaneously attracted and repulsed by it. It was beautiful and ugly, familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Like the Anthropocene, this display provides an illusion or simulation of the natural world. What at first glance may appear to be conventionally natural isn’t necessarily. As Darwin said, the greatest live simulation is nature herself. The presence of living plants might trick one to believe that what they are experiencing is transparent, but nothing is so inside and outside this elaborate display.

Through conversations and research, I now believe that I have been tricked by this simulation too and, up until recently, have been perceiving nature in a very naive way. I now know that when I used to look out onto the landscape, what I used to perceive as nature or natural was simply an illusion. What I am seeing now in its place is the Anthropocene. In this case, the photograph functions simply as a reminder.

## Q&A

**Caroline Picard:** Jenny mentioned how the film that we watched at the beginning of the day, *The Secret Life of Plants* (1979) coincided with the beginning of the environmental movement—the concept of the Anthropocene wasn’t present in that dialogue. But now, I can’t watch the film without thinking through the lens of today; I wonder how that changes things.

**Jenny Kendler:** I don’t want to assume everyone in the room knows the definition of the term, so the *Anthropocene* is generally thought of as the geologic epoch that we inhabit today, marked by the moment when human influence has begun to affect every part of the globe—so we’re using it as a catchall term to talk about human influence now becoming part of the shaping of the ecosphere. One way that I like to think about it is that human care has now become one of the dominant forces on the planet. So, we’re no longer just talking about the hydrologic cycle and the carbon cycle—which of course are really relevant to our discussion of plants—but we’re also talking also about human empathy and subsequent human action—or lack thereof. Whether or not humans *care* about a species has now become one of the largest determinants in whether or not we see it survive into the next century. So, I see this as being interesting to talk about in the context, related to what I brought up with Michael



Marder...What is our responsibility to care for the plants that grow on this planet? And Ashley, I'm also thinking of your work, because you're exposing the "gardener's hand" here...but I think we could also pull the camera back and look at the entire planet. The entire planet is now being "gardenized" in a certain sense. One question could be, "Are we being good gardeners or not?"... because mostly, what we're doing is disrupting these complex plant systems. Sometimes yes, Kimberly-Clark is clear-cutting old growth forests to make paper towels. That's clear and unforgivable destruction, and lack of care. But a lot of the time, the harm we humans do to push these systems of whack is not even intentional. So, if we were to re-contextualize our own position and begin to think of ourselves as gardeners, wanting to nurture diversity and growth—which can also be an uncomfortably paternalistic concept and I'd like us to problematize that, too—But how can we create a new "ethos of care"? And then importantly, how can encountering plant presence in a de-habituated, more authentic way, help us to understand what these "others" might need...or even want? How fair is it for *us* to define or restrict the life pathways open to other beings?

**Moe Beitiks:** I feel like you bring up some really good points that are embodied in the debate specifically over the term Anthropocene, and even, "is the term itself Anthropocene, too human-centric of a concept?"—this kind of back-and-forth between how humans are implicated in dominance over non-humans, vs. the audacity of intervening at all. You mentioned something that I think is relevant to what Graham Harman talks about when he says "it's the nature of objects to withhold themselves." One thing that's come up multiple times in multiple discussions is the ultimate kind of *unknowability* of the other, or the non-human. That we can skate close to it, but never quite get a full comprehension, that unknowability makes what might be good management much more challenging. That if we understood ourselves as being in a management position, for instance, and wanted to right by those who were under our administration, that maybe the best way to do it would be to best understand their needs. We have some very clear understandings of what those are, and then there are limits. Presence becomes important in that it offers a foothold into the *possibility of that understanding*. That in encountering presence we have the potential of a different viewpoint, a different experience, a different relationship, a different way of thinking about this non-human plant. But it's also frustrating, in that the experience of presence is also the experience *of those limits*. And so, the difficult position we seem to be in is that there's a level of management that's become ubiquitous, to the

point where its relevance and usefulness is questionable. And the question becomes: how do we best understand that which is managed? And: is presence, or the encounter of presence, a way to improve, or to deepen that understanding?

**Picard:** Yes, and how do you identify a strangeness that is implicit in the other (or the plant) and what is one projecting upon it? Earlier, Claudia Flores pointed out that the legal system is built around the idea of conflict; there are always two opposing parties that the law was created in order to mediate. To bring plants or nature into the legal paradigm is to bring them into opposition to humans or culture. It's valuable on the one hand as it makes the human accountable for the way it exploits natural resources and landscapes. On the other hand, this arrangement reiterates the nature/culture binary. And that is just one example of an abstract point of departure that shapes our subsequent relationship to the environment. How does one subvert these implicit or invisible associations and politics that we unconsciously project onto nature? The photo you presented, Ashley, seems like another kind of mirror—the pristine and perfectly groomed flower beds are prepared for viewers to fulfil public and general expectations—they garden arrangements bear with them additional associations of class, regionalism, aesthetic expectations—but you're calling forth the way that this highly cultivated instance is not natural, but rather part of a global circulation of material—the product of global economics: shipping ways, international trade agreements, mass production, probably even the Panama Canal. (laughs)

**Ashley Gillanders:** Yes, that's exactly it. Their beauty is distracting. And while I don't believe that there's anything wrong with simply enjoying them because they're beautiful, I think we often forget just how loaded these plants and flowers and some of the larger conversations surrounding them are. One artist who I think addresses this really well is Taryn Simon with her series *Paperwork and the Will of Capital* in which she employs the formal language of Dutch-still life painting and re-creations of floral arrangements from the signings of various treaties, major accords, etc. to think about the ways in which economic and political power is created and performed. I've been thinking about that work a lot.

**Andrew Yang (audience):** Thanks so much for the presentation. After watching the four of your presentations together and the visual material you showed—and framing it within the Anthropocene, I guess it just makes me wonder if maybe, in this case, the Anthropocene doesn't

describe the condition under which humans are the main agent, but rather humans are the means by which this change has happened. Especially as I think about tulips...there's a lot that's been written on the notion that we're the vehicle through which plants propagate themselves, right? The tulip fever of Holland at different times, Holland, Michigan, that's just west of Grand Rapids—but these garden shows, all the means by which they perpetuate themselves...When Moe talks about this management, maybe that's just part of the grand illusion, the illusion management that Ashley's bringing up, that we're still in a domesticating space when in fact *we've* been domesticated...the temporality of the plant, which we're calling vegetality in this really generic way when there's hundreds of thousands of species of plant—perhaps in their temporality of hundreds of millions of years, we're this blip that's just being marshalled and activated for these other means. Anyway, these was just some ideas that were popping up for me.

**Kendler:** Well, it *is* interesting that we're adding carbon dioxide to the atmosphere, which of course is exactly what plants need to grow. And there is evidence, that the rates of some plant's growth is increasing because of this—although certainly other plants will be driven out of their eco-zones and become extinct because of climate change. But I think what you say is compelling. Something else I was thinking about the Ana Mendieta piece is how it suggests this “wholeness of body,” between the human and the plant elements. Like our own bodies, plant bodies are made of many diverse cell communities. Our microbiomes are many, many, many different micro-organisms living within us as a single community, so that nine out of ten cells in the human body are “non-human.” When thinking of this, you start to realize the arbitrariness of lines drawn around “the individual,” of saying “I, human being, have one particular type of agency.” In fact, I think our individuality is illusionistic, but then it's interesting to think that if it is useful sometimes to define ourselves as an individual, then under those same auspices, the Earth itself is one living system, an individual. This is the Gaia theory that's been put forth by James Lovelock. So that could be proposition for another way to interact with plants: to think about them not as this “other,” but rather “we're all parts of this system, together.” So, if we could think of plants as our neighbors and kin—all of us co-participants in one single living, sensing body—then by re-tuning our own sensitivities to our participation in that single body, we would recognize that their health is also our health, right?

**Beitiks:** I feel like there's been sort of some interesting points raised—Michael Marder drew this great parallel between the act of being and growing at the same time—about this difficulty in our first-hand experience of plants, in that they are something that is growing and doing and moving constantly, but that our experience of them is one of stillness and of separateness. I'm just wondering what folks think about—in encountering plants in a curated space, the kind of unique problems of negotiating this *thing* that is growing and breathing, but that those actions might not be immediately perceived by the viewer or understood as being constant.

**Audience:** Because we've been talking about how we should change our relationship with nature, do you think we should conceive of ourselves as collaborators with nature, should we be stewards of nature, or should we serve nature—how do these different conceptions manifest care differently?

**Picard:** I wonder if that is one of the big problems of our time. I want to connect your question with what Moe described about working within the gallery space—even just to suggest that we've gone this far, in the Western trajectory, with these very clear borders between what “nature” and “culture” is. The exhibition context itself, especially the museum, is invested in the stability of that order. Most of our knowledge collecting, organizing, and disseminating objects is similarly invested in that order and a range of subsequent divisions: first you have nature-culture, then you have human-animal, mind-body, spirit-matter. There's an implicit hierarchy in these delineations, whether we are constantly aware of it or not. When the plant is introduced, it becomes a kind of radical agent. Plants are everywhere so they are mundane, but we can't quite figure their agency...they grow, they follow the sun, they decompose. They are clearly alive, but we resist attributing them consciousness—hence their ability to disrupt binaries. I was in a conversation with museum curators and custodians at one point, and they described how difficult it is for a museum to collect Bio Art, because it's constantly changing, and because it also constitutes a threat to the rest of the art in the museum.

**Kendler:** I think that that's like a perfect question to ask in this context. After all the symposium is called *Botanical Speculations*. I would suggest that this is a question that we all need to answer. I think that art is one of the best ways in which we can propose alternatives, right? So, to think through “how things might be otherwise.” And I think that you're right in recognizing a real need for this. There's a paucity of visualization of what

a holistic future in collaboration with nature, in service of nature—any of these things might be, so we don't have a very clear cultural picture of what these other alternatives might look like. Our culture is fascinated with apocalypses. For example, I think people have been using the zombie narrative or metaphor for a long time to talk about the very real potential of ecological collapse—so I think we all know what that looks like. Culture has gone through those motions over and over. But what we don't have a good sense of is what does a positive ecologically integrated future look like? How could we build that? I think this is really great work for artists to do. That's what we are: we're culture creators, and we need to make and share potential visions, speculative visions, of what these future worlds could be.



## CHAPTER SIX

### RESIST LIKE A PLANT

LINDSEY FRENCH, DARIUS JONES,  
N. DAVINA STEWART, KATHERINE MOORE POWELL  
AND FALAK VASA

*This panel considers different notions of resistance as performed, inspired, or inscribed in the vegetal world. From the gallery space and disadvantaged urban area, to Illinois' vanishing prairies and invasive species. It gathers the voices and works of SAIC faculty and students, community entrepreneurs, and scientific perspectives from the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago.*

#### **Lindsey French—*Scent and Consent***

To begin, I'd like to highlight that I'm continually informed by readings, texts, conversations, friendships, and other relationships that affect me deeply and casually. This includes so many of the other panelists in this symposium, and I'm grateful for the ways we influence one another.

In April, I was invited to participate in a performative exhibition of scent, organized as a dinner party where no food would be served. Hosted at TUSK in Chicago, the work was curated by Kate Sierzpurtowski and Mary Eleanor Wallace, with artists Christalena Hughmanick, Joshua Kent, Matt Morris, and Patricia Rose.<sup>1</sup> Given my work with plants, I was asked to prepare a 'salad' course.

It could be unsettling to recognize the promiscuity of communication that occurs around us, across our boundaries, without our

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<sup>1</sup> *Dinner Party* was a performative exhibition of scent at TUSK on April 7 & 8, 2017, curated by Mary Eleanor Wallace and Kate Sierzpurtowski, with artists Christalena Hughmanick, Joshua Kent, Matt Morris, and Patricia Rose





[Fig. 6.1]

**Lindsey French**

*Smelling Salts for Dinner Party*, custom smelling salts with essence of spinach, bergamot, thyme, and violet, sealed with beeswax and served in the shell of a quail egg, 2017, photo: David Sampson © Lindsey French

consent. As a form of communication, some plants release volatile organic chemicals into the atmosphere, signaling warnings to predators or attracting predators of potential threats. Biological definitions of communication fruitfully broaden the scope of communication to move beyond information exchange toward sensory exchange. Martin Schaefer and Graham Ruxton, in *Plant-Animal Communication* write, “There is communication between one individual (the sender) and another individual (the receiver) if trait values of the sender stimulate the sensory systems of the receiver in such a way as to cause a change of behavior of the receiver... (1.1).”<sup>2</sup>

This focus on the receiver, rather than the sender, invites up a number of practices of receptivity in communication. These practices position oneself as a radically receptive member of communicative assemblages that encompass more-than-human realms. A plant recedes into the background, is the background. *Feel yourself recede, withdraw. but do not move. You cannot move, except to grow. You cannot move, except to be moved by another force, or another body.*<sup>3</sup>

I prepared for guests spirits of Hartshorne in an aqueous ammonia solution -- smelling salts, suspended in solution, and used to revive one from too faint a state. Inhaled at the edge of fainting, they bring you back to attention.

Smelling salts are most often configured in the collective imaginary of Victorian women, a potent compound carried about in small vinaigrettes, used at the proper moment to bring one back from too passive a state, from fading too quietly into the background. The perfect woman, perhaps, was perched ever just on this edge of passive weakness and alert attention. Today, wrestlers and athletes take smelling salts, for an extra whiff of attention when becoming too weak.

*Embrace this weakness. Inhale. Open yourself to the volatile chemicals surrounding you.* What is the risk of momentarily finding yourself passive, of weakening your boundaries? *Transgressions across your boundaries occur on the cellular level at sticky membranes. Your inhalation leaves you open to the air. You inhale the output of everything*

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<sup>2</sup> H. Martin Schaefer and Graham D Ruxton, *Plant-Animal Communication*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 1.1.

<sup>3</sup> Italicized texts Italicized lines are excerpted from *Toward Photosynthesis*, originally performed for *aper\_ture: admitting the light*, with collaborative group \_ture, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, curated by Ann Meisenger, 2017, and again for *Exercises in Receptivity: Solar Works* by Kamau Patton and Lindsey French, Special Collections, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, curated by Kayla Anderson, 2017.



[Fig. 6.2]

**Lindsey French**

*Smelling Salts for Dinner Party*, custom smelling salts with essence of spinach, bergamot, thyme, and violet, sealed with beeswax and served in the shell of a quail egg, 2017, photo: by David Sampson © Lindsey French

*around you. You are valued because you are receptive to the toxic everything around you. Inhale, breathe deeply, and consent to the volatile molecules that cross your edges.*

The light-energy conversion process of photosynthesis drives the manufacture of organic molecules of consumption - phenomena essential to virtually all life forms.

These smelling salts I prepared were suspended in a solution of spinach essence and then sealed in an emptied quail egg. When spinach is exposed to airborne ammonia, photosynthesis is interrupted. Enough like water, the ammonia molecule replaces the water molecule, bonded, and no reaction is catalyzed. The spinach, the plant, is unable to produce.<sup>4</sup> *What*

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<sup>4</sup> Platt SG, Anthon GE, "Ammonia accumulation and inhibition of photosynthesis in methionine sulfoximine treated spinach," *Plant Physiology*, 1981 Mar;67(3): 509-13.



[Fig. 6.3]

**Lindsey French**

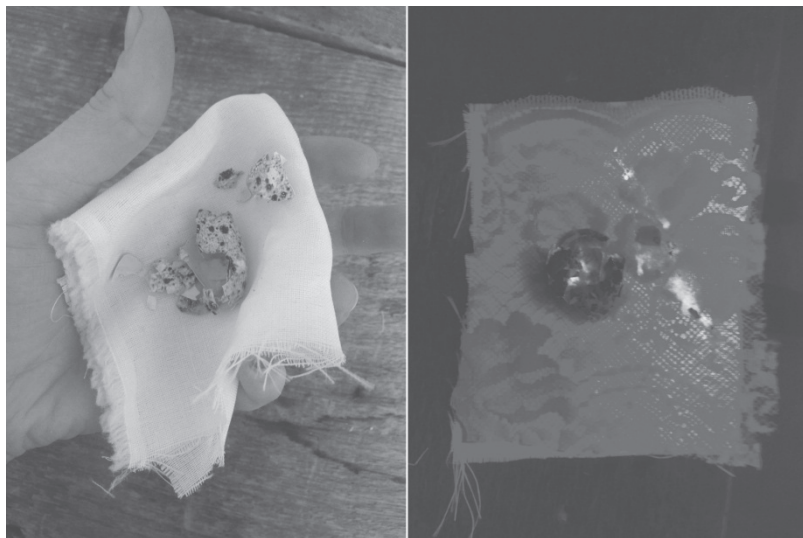
*Smelling Salts for Dinner Party*, custom smelling salts with essence of spinach, bergamot, thyme, and violet, sealed with beeswax and served in the shell of a quail egg, 2017, photo: David Sampson © Lindsey French

*you produce for yourself you produce for anyone else to consume. Photosynthesis is most effective when a plant is most passive. The most affective moments are the most effective, in the right kind of economy.*

The first eggs I knew were chicken eggs, the second eggs my own. As a young girl, I did not know that economy ran on the idea of me. As a young girl, I did not know my weakness was productive. As a young girl, the spinach did not know it was produce.

Crushing the egg, volatile airborne compounds release. There are always already volatile airborne chemicals surrounding you affecting you, whether or not you acknowledge them. When the container collapses, these elements expand into the air around you. When exposed to airborne ammonia, your mucus membranes open, sticky and receptive to oxygen and air around you.

These smelling salts fluoresce, imbued with pigments that release stored light energy. Plants fluoresce when they photosynthesize. NASA



[Fig. 6.4]

**Lindsey French**

*Smelling Salts for Dinner Party* (process documentation), custom smelling salts with essence of spinach, bergamot, thyme, and violet, sealed with beeswax and served in the shell of a quail egg, 2017, photo: Lindsey French © Lindsey French

recently imaged the earth to find that the cornfields of the Midwest were vibrantly fluorescing, releasing bursts of fluorescence beyond our perception.<sup>5</sup> The chlorophyll of a spinach plant fluoresces under light.

Is there something valuable or pleasurable in momentarily considering ourselves in the more passive position of receiver? As the “Anthropos” of the Anthropocene, this role allows for a certain reprieve, a moment of passivity and reflection, in the deep responsibility of identifying with the most geologically influential species on the planet.

And yet this position invites us to recede into a background, where this withdrawal can create space and attention for what was otherwise ignored or marginalized. Can practices of weakness and receptivity momentarily disorient us from the strong and fixed anxieties and failures of anthropocentrism and orient us toward reparative work?

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<sup>5</sup> Kathryn Hansen, “Seeing Photosynthesis from Space: NASA Scientists Use Satellites to Measure Plant Health,” NASA, July 24, 2013, <https://www.nasa.gov/content/goddard/seeing-photosynthesis-from-space-nasa-scientists-use-satellites-to-measure-plant-health/>.



[Fig. 6.5]

**Lindsey French**

*Smelling Salts for Dinner Party* (process documentation), custom smelling salts with essence of spinach, bergamot, thyme, and violet, sealed with beeswax and served in the shell of a quail egg, 2017, photo: Lindsey French © Lindsey French



## **Darius Jones—Never Looked Back**

I grew up in East Garfield Park, here in Chicago, so today I work in my community. I was first introduced to plants in 2009. Until that point, I never had an interest in plants and I never even noticed them that much. I was incarcerated and decided to take the opportunity to get outdoors through a gardening program the prison offered. At the beginning it was only a means to get outside and do something.

Fast forward, all these years later and I am the Vice President and General Manager at Garfield Produce which is an indoor, hydroponic farm. Being involved in a hydroponic operation is kind of different from my background. Over the last seven years, I've been involved in some of the largest projects in the City of Chicago, from building greenhouses to rooftop developments, to in-ground production in our rural areas, as well as in the city.

Years ago, I took an Aquaponics course and it led me to hydroponics. Once I got involved in hydroponics, my interest in plants and growing produce became the main drive in my life. We use an organic process to grow our vegetables out of our operation. When Giovanni approached me to participate in this symposium, he mentioned that I would be part of the panel called 'Resist Like a Plant', and I thought: I know a thing or two about that...". My livelihood depends on plants. I'm always experiencing some type of plant-failure or crop-failure that I have to figure out and prevent. In this sense, my resistance is linked to the resistance of my plants.

Getting involved in hydroponics, taught me many different skills. I learned how plants feed on light, or what type of light source is necessary for the plant to evolve and turn into this beautiful thing that we all love. As I've progressed in my career, I've learned a lot about the plant species and the different varieties of plants that I grow. I initially couldn't even imagine how many different types of vegetables there are—all I knew were Skittles.

I still remember the one vegetable that changed my life was carrots. It was a variety of carrot and it was called purple haze carrot. Anybody familiar with the purple haze carrot? Yes. It's a neon-purple color, and then on the inside, it's this bright orange. You bite into it and it tastes like candy. I was like: "This is better than Lemonheads. Why am I eating candy when I can be eating this carrot?" At that point, I wanted to grow some of the best carrots that I can possibly grow.





[Fig. 6.6]

**Krzysztof Ziarek***Garfield Park Conservatory, Kenraiz-CC-BY-SA-4.0*

As somebody new to gardening, I thought I can just pop the seed in the ground, and then, "Oh, six months later I get carrots." That was not the case, of course. This is called resist like a plant. Or at least it is my version of resist like a plant. As I begin to interact with plants, I began to learn. Up until that point, as a teenager, I was really involved with all the negativity that you hear about in Chicago. As I began to engage with the plants, I began to slow down as a human-being. My rhythm changed. It made me realize that life can just be like growing a plant, "Okay, life is a step-by-step process, and you have to have the proper environment around you to accomplish success."

At the beginning, it was all rather hard, and I encountered a fair share of failure. But eventually, success followed, and I wanted to spend more time with plants than with people. [laughs] I went from spending four hours in the garden to 12 or even 16 hours doing whatever was necessary to see the plants to success and to get involved in the growth of a plant or the life of a plant.

Getting involved in the life of plants, or the cultivation of plants can be a real vehicle to understanding who you are as a person. Well, it helped me to understand who I was as a person, at least. Seeing something from a tiny little seed, growing into something that's tangible, that you can

break apart and enjoy and eat... Oh, we were talking about the legal life of plants a little earlier—Don't call the plant police on me!

[laughter]

I do enjoy cutting up some plants and eating them...

[laughter]

Jokes aside, tending to plants changed the way that I viewed the world. Garfield Park is a disadvantaged area in the city. There are vacant lots everywhere but there also is a beautiful park that was built around the Garfield Park Conservatory. The conservatory is a very beautiful place. It's the only free conservatory of its size in the country. The conservatory is well kept, and the plants are beautiful, but as soon as you begin to walk around the area you can see that it is run down and that there is trash everywhere.



[Fig. 6.7]

**Katie Whitehurst**

*Darius Jones* © Katie Whitehurst

Before I began gardening, it was as if I was blind to all the trash that was everywhere. I was blind to the environment. Then, once I started to grow vegetables and learn about food and the different varieties of plants, I began to see these vacant lots, these beautiful pieces, swatches of land. I then become to feel sad. I kept looking at the mess and couldn't stop thinking what it must have been like in the 1700s when the whole city didn't exist, and everything was cleaner. I thought: "humans are horrible!" In finally started to see the plants growing through our trash despite our lack of care. To me, that was the best form of resistance. Look around you, wherever you are when you walk down the street and you will find a plant, somewhere, growing through the concrete, making its way through. It's a reminder to continue to push and teach each other about plants, not to forget what they bring to our lives. Sometimes people need a bit of a push to appreciate things, but once they open their eyes, they might never look back.

## N. Davina Stewart—*QuaranTEEN*

*QuaranTEEN* is a youth-centered, outdoor, site-specific, public arts project and live performance about global system collapses, renewable energy, and community self-determination. I developed *QuaranTEEN* to put forth a vision of socio-economic and cultural development. Galvanizing city stakeholders, fellow artists, and the youth of Gary, IN are integral components of the project.

The impetus was based upon my 2006 volunteer experiences in New Orleans and Philadelphia during the aftermaths of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita. In New Orleans, I helped gut a house and learned about the techniques of soil remediation using sunflowers and mycelium which is the vegetative part of fungus like that found in mushrooms. I was also introduced to the efficiencies and limitations of solar powered generators which the organization I volunteered with, Common Ground used to power their information headquarters.

As a Philadelphia resident, I volunteered at the Wanamaker school which the city had converted into a one-stop emergency shelter for people displaced by the storms. The hurricanes taught me how the will and planning strategies of governmental agencies could either result in inefficient or effective responses to natural disasters. I also learned how well organized and humane community members could be in a time of crisis. By the end of the ordeal, it was clear that marginalized and under-resourced communities would suffer irreparable harm if they were not prepared to face the challenges of global warming, an attack upon the energy grid, or even a major storm that could threaten food supplies.

My time in New Orleans made me question the levels of preparedness of other marginalized communities and I realized that many American cities like my hometown of Gary, IN were just one blizzard/natural disaster or a power outage away from chaos and collapse. I began to think about being pre-emptive.

For me, building stronger community connections and reminding people of their capacity to problem solve and innovate were just as integral to structural change as remediating soil, eliminating food deserts, and building affordable housing. I am a writer and performer who embodies texts. Most of my work is interactive and based upon the tenets and techniques of applied theater and Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed which are designed to allow audiences to become active participants in addressing social issues. I am thoroughly convinced people should be given opportunities to practice liberation and envision more just and sustainable alternatives in real-time; therefore, I create live interactive

performative experiences. It is both fun and empowering to “act out” possibilities.

*QuaranTEEN* is such a project. *QuaranTEEN* is an interactive, live performative speculative fiction-based intervention:

The year is 2079 and the planet and its few remaining residents are slowly venturing out in search of other signs of life. In 2019, the elites left Earth in total chaos and skyrocketed to outer-space to terraform Mars. Terraforming was successful. Creating a viable civilization failed. The elites’ low frequency individualistic warmongering ethos and propensity for dominance from which they tried to flee was replicated in their new terrain. You know what they say, “wherever you go, there you are.” Back on Earth in Gary, three isolated surviving groups of teens whose ancestors were prepared for the collapse of 2019 and literally went underground, slowly make their way from their safe zones in search of more resources. The groups are The Pollinators, The Techies, and The Seedlings.

Speculative Fiction is about extrapolating current events to plausible conclusions. My extrapolation process was influenced by my admiration for Wangari Maathai, the internationally renowned Kenyan environmental political activist and Nobel Laureate who transitioned in 2011.

In 1977, Professor Maathai founded the Green Belt Movement whose mission, according to their website, “is poverty reduction and environmental conservation through tree planting...GBM encouraged the women to work together to grow seedlings and plant trees to bind the soil, store rainwater, provide food and firewood, and receive a small monetary token for their work... Since 1977, GBM communities have planted over 51 million trees in Kenya.”

Professor Maathai's work resonated with me for various reasons, one being my love for trees. Trees are my favorite lifeform and by 2008 I had come to think of myself as a kindred spirit. I read and create a lot of my work while nestling in branches or relaxing at the foot of trees. I am inspired by their resiliency and thankful for their many life-sustaining properties. Trees are some of the oldest life forms on the planet. They are a wealth of knowledge. I desire to be as essential to my community as a tree is to the planet. I began to correlate my existence to community revitalization and conceptualized myself as a sapling in need of strategic planting. I decided to move back home to Gary, IN in the hopes of utilizing my skill-sets and energy to help stabilize my family and join efforts to reinvigorate my struggling post-industrialized birthplace.





[Fig. 6.8]  
Wangari Maathai 4.1.1940- 9.25.11 © Demosh

Gary, IN was built as what is known as a company town. All the stores and housing were owned by US Steel who was also the main employer. Gary was created 1906 and the company had a major monopoly in governance and finance well into the mid-1960s and has thwarted city industry diversification and development. As a one-industry town, Gary's economic fate has been interwoven with that of the declining steel industry. Beginning in the 1960s through the 1980s, white flight, brain drain, economic distress, and crime were causes of rapid depopulation. The city went from a peak high of 178,000 residents to the current population of approximately 78,000.

When you relocate to depopulated or high crime cities or areas you want to know what you can do as a solution bearer, or at least I did. I wanted to know as a tree, how would I be sustained, what nourishing fruits would I bear and/ or what would I build. Those were my concerns. As a lifeform, as a human person, when I go into spaces what is my impact? How am I thriving and resisting like a tree?

## The Analogy

While thinking about planting trees and community sustainability, it was only natural for me to conceptualize deforestation as an analogy for urban decay. Urban decay is one of the factors that lead to societal collapse.

Causes of deforestation include ranching, subsistence farming, commercial agriculture and urban use, which lead to extinction, population displacement, climate changes and desertification. The causes of urban decay include white flight, green flight (money) and brain drain, which lead to job/wage loss, crime, food deserts, and demoralization. We talk about white flight a lot, but we don't necessarily always talk about the equally devastating impacts of brain drain which in this case refers to when black middle-class people remove their resources from communities.

Monocropping, repeatedly growing a single crop on the same land, can cause depletion or reduction in diversity of soil nutrients. It can increase crop vulnerability creating a more fragile ecosystem with an increased dependency on pesticides and artificial fertilizers which end up in runoff and pollute water supplies. The human component or equivalent monocropping is urban sprawl. That is when suburbs and housing subdivisions are expanded and consume farmland. It is criticized for causing environmental degradation, reinforcing white hegemony, and intensifying class disparities and segregation.





[Fig. 6.9a and 6.9b]

Top - *Jungle burned for agriculture*. Photo: Jami Dwyer, 2005. Public Domain

Bottom - *Stand Gard*, Gary Indiana, 2009. Photo: Zachary Perlinsky CC BY 2.0



[Fig. 6.10a and Fig. 6.10b]

Top - *Monoculture: Cornfield*, Lehigh Township, Northampton County. Photo: Nicholas A. Tonelli CC BY 2.0

Bottom - *Suburban development*, South San Jose, CA, 2006. Photo: Sean O'Flaherty CC BY 2.5

Polyculture is the opposite of monocropping/ monoculture. When you farm and garden you want to make sure that you have plant diversity in your crops and you grow varieties with beneficial attributes like attracting pollinators or repelling insects in order to decrease disease and increase biodiversity. The equivalent for us as humans would be diversification i.e. expanding or varying products, markets or assets/talents to minimize losses. Urban communities need to diversify their strategies for growth and survival. This includes utilizing renewable energy, building community gardens, food production, and manufacturing businesses, as well as garden to table/store initiatives, worker-owned businesses/cooperatives, and share economies.

My project *QuaranTEEN* is based upon the premise that the world waited too late to implement these changes. There are always small groups of people who are proactive in their survival strategies and refuse to abdicate responsibility for their well-being. These people see the looming chaos and prepare.

The Seedlings is one such group. They secretly stocked non-invasive plants and seeds after the Monsanto Global Expulsion Act made harvesting seeds illegal and purchasing Monsanto non-regenerative seeds mandatory. The Seedlings created food sovereignty by growing vertical gardens in hoop houses and along abandoned buildings. The image that follow are of a living wall on a museum in France and an abandoned building in Gary.

Living walls are aesthetically pleasing but you can actually grow food for people. This abandoned building is the proposed site for the installation of “The Seedlings” vertical garden. It is located across the street from a charter school where I taught in 2015 and would have to construct an edifice that served as a façade.

*QuaranTEEN* is designed to generate discussions and to build tangible products like living walls and vertical gardens that address food and energy shortfalls. You cannot build what you cannot imagine and *QuaranTEEN* is a platform to imagine a better future by literally building a better now.



[Fig. 6.11a]

**N. Davina Stewart**

*Abandoned Building in Gary, Indiana, October 2015 © Stewart*





[Fig. 6.11b]

**Mark B. Schlemmer**

*Musée du quai Branly Paris, France CC YB 2.0*

### Katherine Moore Powell—Resist Like a Prairie

As an Ecohydrologist I am very interested in the ways that water moves through an ecosystem, and also how climate change is impacting water and carbon dioxide cycling, imposing new challenges on those processes. As climate change progresses, it is adding more stress to these ecosystems, but it's amazing to see the manner in which the plants that inhabit the grasslands have already equipped themselves to adapt to these stresses with traits they acquired through evolution. Today, they are adapting on even shorter time scales.

My research took place in adjacent grasslands, a tallgrass prairie, and a mixed grassland, within the Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge in the foothills of Colorado.

The grasslands where I conducted my research were in an area where there was a former weapons component assembly plant followed by an EPA Superfund cleanup. Talk about plants resisting, this is a place that



[Fig. 6.12]

**Katherine Moore Powell**

*Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado, USA. July, 2011* © Katherine Moore Powell

embodies that! Although there is still a small section of this property that is closed off from the public permanently due to contamination, it is surrounded by beautiful, natural wetlands and meadows, including a healthy, native remnant tallgrass prairie, which is the westernmost extent of the prairies that once stretched across the central plains of North America.

I love this photo because what you see here spans a lot of time. In the foreground are 19<sup>th</sup> Century ranch houses and behind them is a modern wind turbine test facility. There is a contrast of old and new. Prairies are vast stretches of grass, beautiful to behold and call back to our history with animals like the American bison, an icon whose herds once covered the landscape.

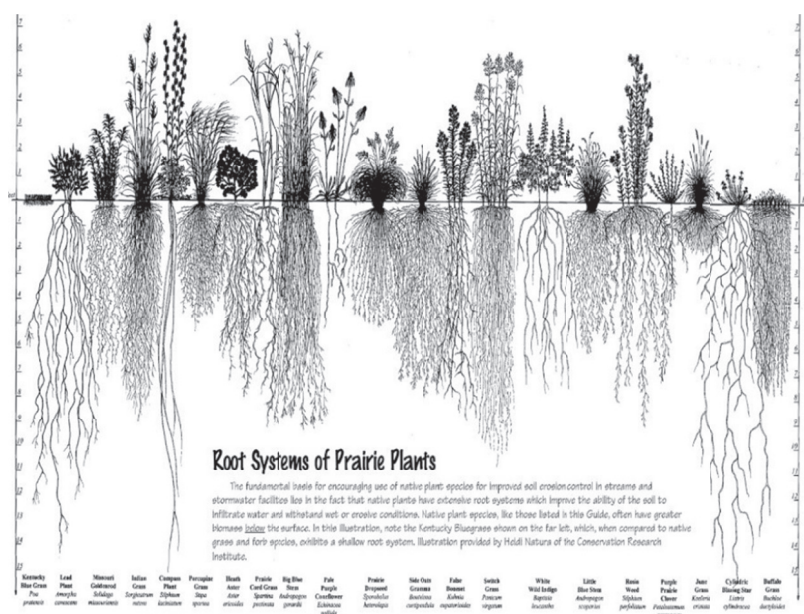


[Fig. 6.13]

**Michelle R. Rundell**

*American Bison at the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve*, date unknown © Michelle R. Rundell





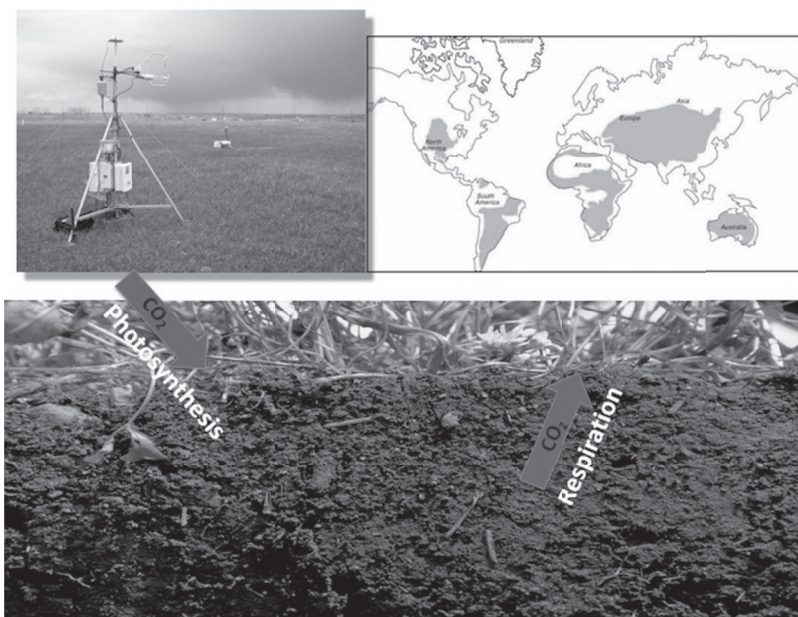
[Fig. 6.14]

**Heidi Natura**

*Root systems of prairie plants*, drawing, 2018 © Living Habitats

Unfortunately, today only about 4% of the original prairies remain in North America, and the current situation is even bleaker for bison, as only about 1% of their population still exists.

While plants resist and exist aboveground, much more life exists underground where the soil, roots, and air and water pockets in between are an unseen world. In some cases, as much as twice as much biomass exists belowground than above it! A healthy soil can hold an incredible amount of life. Just one teaspoon of soil can have as many organisms as there are people on the planet. And while a healthy soil is something we cannot always see, it is an integral part of how we will move forward in dealing with the impacts of climate change. Soils store a great deal of carbon and work in concert with plants to exchange carbon dioxide with the atmosphere.



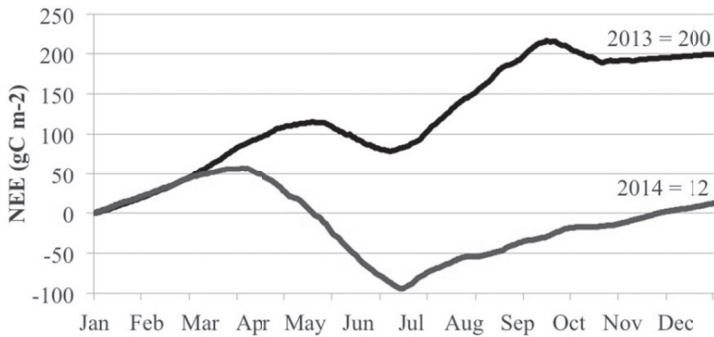
[Fig. 6.15]

**Katherine Moore Powell** (upper left image, lower portion) **Chris Pak** (upper right image) Eddy covariance station (upper left), grasslands of the world (upper right), and CO<sub>2</sub> gas exchange of plants, including soil respiration, 2017 © Katherine Moore Powell / Chris Pak

Grassland comprise nearly 30% of land area globally and the productivity of vegetation in these ecosystems is quite sensitive to rainfall. However, there are complex responses to rainfall of different duration and intensity. The Earth breathes – plants take up CO<sub>2</sub> and breathe out oxygen, and soils exhale CO<sub>2</sub>.

The amount of CO<sub>2</sub> that the entire Earth respires through plants and soil is approximately 10 times the amount that is emitted from burning fossil fuels each year. It is a huge component of the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere. However, this is balanced by the amount of CO<sub>2</sub> taken up by plants through photosynthesis each year. The excess amount humans emit through burning fossil fuels and other land use changes just adds to the concentration in the atmosphere – there is no balancing uptake like there is in natural systems.

This excess CO<sub>2</sub> does create an atmosphere that is friendly to plants – the higher the concentration, the more plants take up and are productive. However, this stays in balance with the amount that they



[Fig. 6.16]

**Katherine Moore Powell**

NEE (Net Ecosystem Exchange) of carbon at Rocky Flats grassland research site for 2013 and 2014. Positive numbers are a loss of carbon to the atmosphere, and negative numbers are an uptake of carbon by the grassland. 2016 © Katherine Moore Powell

respire because they have more biomass to maintain and sustain. Plants fuel this extra productivity by using more sugars from photosynthesis, and thus respiring more. The net exchange is still roughly zero over time.

This balance between photosynthesis and respiration can also be called NEE or net ecosystem exchange. If it's a positive number then the ecosystem is losing carbon, and if it's negative, it is gaining carbon. The graph in Fig. 5 shows the carbon exchange for two years of my research at Rocky Flats.

The hydrologic cycle gets ramped up by climate change as the Earth systems warm, ramping it up and creating more extreme rain events, but also shifting when rain happens seasonally. This can have a strong impact on the balance between photosynthesis and respiration. My study contrasted water and carbon fluxes in a smooth brome-dominated mixed grassland in Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado, USA. We found that the cool season grassland was consistently a net uptake of carbon during the spring and autumn for both years, however, the difference in water balance between the two years played a significant role in the magnitude of carbon uptake and loss. Spring precipitation (March-May) was 39% higher in 2014 (124 mm in 2013, and 172 mm in 2014), resulting in a more productive 2014 growing season. Precipitation patterns also influenced carbon loss in complex ways, increasing respiration on daily timescales, though large precipitation events recharged soil water, which in turn increased long-term, seasonal carbon uptake. Although 2013 had above-average annual precipitation, this was a result of an extreme

precipitation event late in the growing season, and the additional carbon uptake that it induced was insufficient to compensate for the weak carbon uptake during the spring when water was more limited.

A lot of what I do involves measuring things that you cannot see, and sometimes I am also disrupting a system while I am measuring it. The towers that we used to conduct the scientific research were placed in the center of the grasslands and drew all kinds of animals, insects, and birds to the area - changing the very system that I was attempting to measure. We as humans frequently impact the subject that we are trying to help just by observing and attempting to measure it. Now my work involves connecting the science of climate change impacts on water and carbon cycling in natural systems to restoration work that my group at the Field Museum does. Ultimately, we really help plants resist.

### Falak Vasa—*Dear Kuzu*

I quote from Wikipedia, the most trusted source of knowledge and most popular citation in academic symposia worldwide: “Kudzu are climbing, coiling and trailing perennial vines...Where these plants are naturalized, they can be invasive and are considered noxious weeds. The plant climbs over trees or shrubs and grows so rapidly that it kills them by heavy shading.” In the Spring of 2015, I decided that I wanted to naturalize the kudzu in my shoe, to climb, coil and trail around my foot and over my entire body. In the Spring of 2015, I was not a very smart human being.



[Fig. 6.17]

**Falak Vasa**

*Kuzu and I*, polaroid from trip to Lake Geneva, 2015 © Falak Vasa

*Dear Kuzu...* was a durational 7-day performance wherein I attempted to grow the kudzu vine (an invasive species) in a structure that allowed my foot and the plant to share the same space. This structure was permanent and was never removed through the performance—I slept with it and showered with it. The performance was documented in multiple ways:

1. Letters written everyday
2. Pictures taken of Kuzu and I every hour of every day
3. Audio recordings of lullabies sung to Kuzu every night
4. Food logs
5. Email exchanges with others about Kuzu
6. Facebook event page for a baby shower for Kuzu
7. Polaroids from our trip to Lake Geneva, WI
8. Scars left on my foot
9. Our abandoned home
10. Kuzu's family grown as 'controls'



[Fig. 6.18]

**Falak Vasa**

*Letters*, 2015 © Falak Vasa

One of the letters written to Kuzu:

Dear Kuzu,

Today, I experienced one of the most difficult and saddest moments of my life. Over the past two nights, despite my best efforts to keep you safe, my human subconscious made me shift and move while I slept. I hurt you. I broke you. And breaking you broke me into a million little pieces. I had to make the toughest decision and for your health, I had to cut you. I want you to know I'm sorry and that it will never happen again. I hope I was able to make it up to you by spending all my time with you today. I didn't think about anything else all day and our time at the playground was so amazing. I saw people with their children there. They could move and run and smile and talk. But I wasn't jealous at all, Kuzu. I felt honored to have you. You've taught me the value of stillness. You have taught me to be patient and calm; you have left me mesmerized in the subtlest of ways. They will never know what it's like. Now, Kuzu, all that matters is, I am yours and you are mine.

Yours, Falak



[Fig. 6.19]

**Falak Vasa**

*Home*, 2015 © Falak Vasa



What does a home for an invasive plant and a human foot look like? Can they co-exist? What does it mean to show compassion to a non-human that is 'other', a largely unwanted 'other'? How does one other another other? How does one other “unother” another other? Through our movement between the roles of friends and frenemies and partners and parents and tinder matches and platonic colleagues, *Dear Kuzu* raises questions of 'belonging' to/for an 'other', attempts to answer them, and fails miserably.



[Fig. 6.20]

**Falak Vasa**

Installation view of *Dear Kuzu*, 2015 © Falak Vasa

## Q&A

**Audience:** Hi, I just wanted to say, “thank you”. I thought you folks brought great ideas to our inner connection with nature, but I have a question specifically for Darius Jones. How do you see urban farming tackle different social injustices found in abundance within this location? What are your community ties with Garfield in regard to social injustice?

**Darius Jones:** Back in 2013, I started this business called Aggies in partnership with USDA. I used to work for the Chicago Botanic Garden

and I received this generous grant that made that possible for me. Back then, it was just a vacant lot into a gardening project.

Well, Garfield Produce is completely different from that. It is completely different because now we're restoring this old warehouse facility, this broken-down warehouse that's beautiful—this area has so many beautiful empty buildings. One of the best parts of this project is that now I'm taking what I learned about agriculture and horticulture from in outdoor spaces into this underutilized facility and restoring that for different purposes.

I have friends in the neighborhood who can't quite get their heads around what it is that I do. They still think that I do landscape gardening even though they see the hydroponics facility. They're still like, "Oh, my friend works with this landscape company, you cut grass too, right?" "No, I don't." But using these new set of skills in a way is not just educational in terms of teaching people about healthy foods and eating locally, the difference between our local organic or sustainable food because those labels have different meanings.

It's showing others how you can use plants as a means to an end like how we can take these old broken-down facilities and turn them into vegetable-production-spaces and max-out a square footage by going vertical with it. We are still at the beginning of this, but within the next six months, that space will be a productive vertical system. A 2200 square feet floor-space automatically turns into an 8800 square foot space. Instead of having one acre of outdoor garden space, now we have multiple.

**Davina Stewart:** Sweet Beginnings have bee colonies, they harvest the honey and they sell it to Whole Foods and all these other places but the people who work there are people who were in prison. Part of us making this food system is for people who come home so we decrease recidivism. People are employed. For my project, the Pollinators are those children growing honey and they're using the bee wax to do candles. Then for the children who are doing the vertical gardens, they're taking that food and they're preserving it so they are learning how to do that. Then the techie children, they're bicycling. They're making their own energy. We can source food now, we can sell that food and we can say it is made in Gary. "We did that. We made that and we're selling it." We're trying to make sure that people have jobs and that the people who own those jobs are those students so that they become entrepreneurs. We have one school; do you work with Thea Bowman?

**Lindsey French:** We worked with Theam Bowman in the spring term.

**Stewart:** Okay, it's a charter school where our students have a chicken farm. They do the chickens and they take the eggs to market and they're making money but they're learning how to be business people. That's what we're trying to do, we're trying to make sure that you become self-sufficient and independent.

**Jones:** I just want to add to that too, because I think that's very important what Davina just said. The entrepreneurial aspect is essential. To get this new project off the ground, we had to fundraise over \$600,000. At the beginning I wasn't sure where to plant a seed, and not long after I was going to meet high-level executives. You need to learn to write grants and to talk to many different people. There's the technological dimension and since the project incorporates hydroponics, I'm often in meetings with the city or working on boards about policy around urban agriculture. That's what growing vegetables involves! There are so many people to meet and so much community to build—so many opportunities for many of us.

**Stewart:** The economic viability of other communities.

**Audience:** Hi, I just want to thank you as well for an amazing lineup of presentations. My question is for Falak Vasa. First of all, I wanted to say what an extraordinary project yours is. I was wondering what you aimed to establish or prove or show by having an emotional relationship with an individual plant and whether you think that all humans have to establish such an emotional relation in order to respect plants, to respect nature, or just to live sustainably?

**Vasa:** I definitely don't think everyone has to have an emotional relationship with a plant but it's interesting for me to look back on this work too because it is from two years ago. I'm in such a different place now than I was when I made it.

I originally had two plants. One on my window sill and the other in my foot so that I could monitor and compare their responses. The one plant by the window sprouted leaves by the end of the week, but the one I carried with me died. I think it was the emotions and the care that killed it. That was the thing that disabled that co-existence which was devastating at the time but that now is hilarious. Part of the project had to do with me being new to the United States and wanting to find someone or something to relate to, and that something ended up being an invasive plant. I wasn't

trying to prove anything specific—the work is very much the result of the state of mind and the situation I was in.

**Moore Powell:** Related to that, is there a reason that you picked an invasive plant or would any other plant worked?

**Vasa:** I think it was really important that it was invasive. I liked the idea that it was this being intentionally brought to the United States that goes out of hand and invades territories and changes the bio-balance of the land. Animals were introduced in order to reduce kudzu's spread and then, of course, they become invasive.

**Aloi:** Thank you very much, everybody. I think botanical speculations is over [clapping]. It's been a great journey. Thank you so much for staying with us all day. With a little bit of luck this will become a book. So, if you want to revisit these moments use them for your research that'll be even better. Thank you again. I just consider myself very lucky to work in an institution like SAIC where we are allowed to spend the whole day thinking about plants and art. Thank you very much for coming. Thanks to everyone and most importantly, to the plants.



## CONTRIBUTORS

**Giovanni Aloï** is an art historian in modern and contemporary art specializing in the representation of animals and plants in contemporary art. Aloï currently teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, Sotheby's Institute of Art New York and London, and Tate Galleries. He is the Editor in Chief of *Antennae: The Journal of Nature in Visual Culture* ([www.antennae.org.uk](http://www.antennae.org.uk)). He is the author of *Art & Animals* (2011), *Speculative Taxidermy: Natural History, Animal Surfaces, and Art in the Anthropocene* (2018), *Why Look at Plants: The Vegetal World in Contemporary Art* (2018) and with Caroline Picard, Aloï is the co-editor of the University of Minnesota Press series *Art after Nature*.

**Aimée Beaubien** is an artist living and working in Chicago. Her sculptural photo-based collages explore collapses in time, space, and place, while playfully engaging the complexities of visual perception. Solo and two-person exhibitions include Gallery UNO Projektraum, Berlin, Germany; The Pitch Project, Milwaukee, WI; BOX 13 Artspace, Houston, TX; Johalla Projects, Chicago, IL and many more. Beaubien is Assistant Professor of Photography at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Meghan Moe Beitiks** is a writer, researcher and performance artist working with associations and disassociations of culture/nature/structure. Joining the editorial staff of the *CSPA Quarterly* in 2014, she was previously a writer/ contributor for the publication as well as to [inhabitat.com](http://inhabitat.com) and [greenmuseum.org](http://greenmuseum.org). She also writes for [culturebot.org](http://culturebot.org) and was featured in "Landing Stages," the archival publication of the Ashden Directory. She previously worked with the CSPA to develop previous convergences and events.

**Sara Black** creates works that exposes the complex ways in which things and people are suspended in worlds together; often generating forms that push beyond human frames of reference. She received her MFA from the University of Chicago in 2006 and is currently in the role of Assistant Professor of Sculpture at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

**Claudia Flores** is an Assistant Clinical Professor of Law and Director of the International Human Rights Clinic (IHRC). IHRC works to promote and protect the human rights of individuals and communities globally. She earned her J.D. from New York University School of Law where she was a Root-Tilden-Kern scholar and received her B.A. in philosophy from the University of Chicago.

**Lindsey French** is an artist and educator whose work engages in gestures of communication with landscapes and the nonhuman. Her work has been exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Chicago Cultural Center, the Chicago Perch, and the Pico House Gallery in Los Angeles, amongst others. French currently teaches courses that explore new media practices and site-specific research at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Art and Technology Studies, Sculpture, and Contemporary Practices Departments.

**Ashley Gillanders** is a lens-based artist from Winnipeg, Canada. Her practice incorporates traditional and experimental approaches to photography, to explore human interactions with built and natural environments. She has participated in residencies at Mentoring Artists for Women's Art, The Banff Centre, the School of Visual Arts, and Ox-Bow School of Art. She is currently an SAIC New Artist Society Scholar and MFA Candidate in the Photography department.

**Amber Ginsburg** works collaboratively and engages materials to create site-generated projects that insert historical scenarios into present day situations. Her background in craft orients her projects towards the continuities and ruptures in material, social, and utopic histories. She received her MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 2009 and currently teaches in the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago.

**Darius Jones** is Vice President and General Manager of Garfield Produce, which is an indoor, hydroponic farm. He spends his days meeting with community members and would-be funders while also drumming up support for the fresh food wholesaler.

**Jenny Kendler** is an interdisciplinary artist, environmental activist & naturalist based in Chicago, whose work been exhibited at museums and biennials, nationally & internationally. She has been commissioned to create public projects for locations from the Arizona desert to a Costa



Rican jungle and is the first ever Artist-in-Residence with environmental non-profit NRDC.

**Tiffany Holmes** is Dean of Undergraduate Studies at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Holmes' research and practice explores the potential of technology to promote positive environmental stewardship. Recent projects include a commission for the National Center for Supercomputing Applications where sequences of experimental animations visualize real time energy loads. She lectures and exhibits worldwide. A recipient of the Michigan Society of Fellows research fellowship in 1998, Holmes has earned the Illinois Arts Council individual grant, an Artists-in-Labs residency award in Switzerland, and a 2010 Rhizome Commission.

**Michael Marder** is Ikerbasque Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz, Spain and Professor-at-Large in the Institute of Humanities at Diego Portales University in Santiago, Chile. His research interests include phenomenology, environmental philosophy, and political thought. An author of eleven books—including, most recently, *Pyropolitics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), *Dust* (Bloomsbury, 2016), with Luce Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being* (Columbia UP, 2016), and *Energy Dreams* (Columbia UP, 2017)—he is currently at work on two monographs, *Heidegger: Phenomenology, Ecology, Politics* (Minnesota UP, 2018) and *Political Categories* (Columbia UP, 2019). His website is [www.michaelmarder.org](http://www.michaelmarder.org).

**Caroline Picard** is a curator, publisher, writer, and artist. She is the Executive Director, Head Curator, and Founding Editor of The Green Lantern Press (GLP), a 501c3 non-profit art producer established in 2005 that produces contemporary art exhibitions, critical art and poetry publications, and cultural events that intersect literature, philosophy, theory, and art.

**Katherine Moore Powell** is a Climate Change Ecologist with the Field Museum in Chicago. As an ecohydrologist, she studies how climate change impacts the water cycle and natural environments. With a masters in hydrogeology from the University of South Florida and a doctorate in Environmental Studies from the University of Colorado, she has experience studying wetlands, grasslands, forests, and urban nature and she led the development of a climate change adaptation plan for the Indiana Dunes region. She is especially interested in soils and urban green infrastructure.

**Joshi Radin** works independently and collaboratively on performance, video, installation, and writing projects dealing with themes of power, empathy and ritual. She is currently an SAIC New Artist Society Scholar and MFA candidate in the Photo department.

**N. Davina Stewart** is a cultural worker who holds a MFA in Interdisciplinary Arts and Media from Columbia College Chicago, a BA in African American Studies from Temple University, and a Post Baccalaureate Certificate in Community Development and Urban Studies from Indiana University.

She is a recipient of the prestigious Leeway Foundation Transformation award that recognizes women and trans artists who create art for social change. As a performance artist, writer, and facilitator, Davina uses satire, speculative fiction, and performance poetry to create compelling counter-narratives to mainstream American misrepresentations of Black people.

**Falak Vasa** is an interdisciplinary artist from Kolkata, India, currently residing in Chicago and studying at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (BFA 2018). His work intertwines performance, video, installation and photography to investigate his relationship with ecology through the lenses of politics, spirituality, science, and personal narrative. He also enjoys confusing cats.

**Andrew Yang** works across the visual arts, the sciences, and natural history to explore the cosmological flux. Exhibiting from Oklahoma to Yokohama, his writing & research can be found in journals including *Biological Theory*, *International Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, *Current Biology*, and *Leonardo*. He currently is an associate professor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a research associate at the Field Museum of Natural History. He earned his PhD in Biology at Duke University.

**Ash Wolfe** is currently a BFA candidate at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Art and Technology Program. Their focus is on plant life, relationships between plants and humans, and plant sentience. With their work they create wearables that alter or benefit the wearer's experience.